

Film, Fear and the Female:
An Empirical Study of the Female Horror Spectator

By

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Abstract

This thesis combines feminist theoretical frameworks of analysis with original, empirical research to examine the under-representation of the female horror spectator in critical, academic discourse. The merging of theory and empirical data allows for an in-depth study of the psychological motivations of the female spectator and her relative absence from theoretical study. Drawing heavily upon the work of Brigid Cherry, Justin Nolan and Gery Ryan, this project comparatively assesses fandom as exemplified by the female spectator, as contrasted to the male spectator; the subject of myriad critical investigations of the horror spectator. Utilizing a sample of twenty-two, self-identified female horror fans, this study offers an original glimpse into the preferences, responses and motivations of the female horror fan. The findings of this project support the hypothesis that female horror fans prefer intellectually stimulating films and narratives, regardless of the inclusion of graphic violence. Challenging a variety of misconceptions about horror spectatorship, the present project opens a new line inquiry into a field of investigation previously considered unworthy of study. Finally, this thesis invites further exploration of a new subgenre of horror deemed the cerebral slasher and its unique appeal to the female spectator.

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Introduction

A Personal Investment in the Social Psychology of Horror

When I first came to graduate school, I was intimidated by the conviction of the other students. Everyone seemed to have found their niche, all of which appeared to be based in critically sound and acceptable topics of study. I knew in my heart that I wanted to investigate the horror genre and the psychological assessment of fear in the spectator. However, when it came to discussing my research interests, I buried my passion in a slew of other topics. I would say I was interested in the studio system, early Hollywood and the political economy approach to film studies. This was all true; I was and still am interested in all of these areas. I would say was fascinated by French New Wave filmmakers, controversial cinema and experimental art films. Again, these are truths, but I was masking my truest and most treasured passion- horror.

In the first year of my program, I was presenting a research proposal for a final assignment in Dr. Charles O'Brien's core graduate course. After believing I had cleverly danced about my true object of interest, Dr. O'Brien stopped me and said, "It sounds like what you are really interested in is psychological horror." I had been found out! Dr. O'Brien saw through my thin façade and presented my secret for all to hear. I tentatively acknowledged the accuracy of his deduction. Instead of the condemnation and condescension I had anticipated, I was met with support and encouragement. Simplistically and bluntly, Dr. O'Brien said, "Well, then that's what you should do."

An indescribable sense of relief followed this experience. I was being granted permission to do what I wanted, to produce work which interested me, to pursue my passion and conduct my own research. I quickly discovered- it came as a surprise, though retrospectively it should not

have- that there was an abundance of literature written about the horror genre and even, about spectator responses to graphic and violent imagery. However, it also became clear that something was lacking from the literature. Anytime I encountered reference to a horror film spectator, he was characterized as male. Furthermore, whenever horror fans were discussed, the fans were exclusively male. I felt that sense of discouragement pervading again.

I knew female horror fans existed. I identified as a female horror fan and I was writing for a website called *Ottawa Horror*. Of the regular five contributors, three of us were female. We were also highly opinionated and thoroughly knowledgeable about the genre and various trivial details and facts. When I mentioned my difficulty finding academic investigations of the female spectator and horror fan, the women of *Ottawa Horror* sighed and grudgingly agreed that the female horror fan is usually ignored and considered non-existent (or when acknowledged, she is plagued by erroneous misconceptions). I realized that I was not the only woman feeling neglected by the academy.

Where were the female fans and why weren't we being represented? I was introduced to Dr. Aalya Ahmad through my work with *Ottawa Horror*. I was told that I could audit her *Monstrous Feminine* course as a member of *Ottawa Horror* and that given the nature of my work, she may be an invaluable resource to my research. This could not have been more accurate. Dr. Ahmad immediately commiserated with my plight of under-representation in scholarly research and being the proactive woman that she is, Dr. Ahmad suggested we get started on doing something about it. After reading Nolan and Ryan¹ for her class one week, I was exposed to a merging of my two academic backgrounds.² Nolan and Ryan conducted an

¹ Justin M. Nolan and Gery W. Ryan, "Fear and Loathing at the Cineplex: Gender Differences in Descriptions and Preferences of Slasher Films," *Sex Roles* 42.1/2, (2000): 39-56.

² . My undergraduate degrees include both a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and a Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies.

empirical study of horror film thematics and spectator reception. The study was divided by gender and made inferences based on mathematical assessments of their responses. I was instantly intrigued. In my next meeting with my MA thesis supervisor, Dr. André Loiselle, I asked if students in my department ever conduct empirical research and if it would be a possibility for my thesis. He answered that it was infrequent and uncommon, but not impossible. I was suddenly bolstered by a sense of purpose and certainty.

In addition to the empirical research conducted for this project, a lengthy analysis of theoretical approaches to horror was utilized for comparisons and contrasts. Upon recommendations from Dr. Loiselle and Dr. Ahmad, I began to wade through theory and I discovered the one-sided nature of representation of horror fans. Dr. Ahmad has written about female spectators.³ and discusses the concept of horror as a guilty pleasure for the female fan. This statement resonated with my initial experiences in the academic realm. I was elusive about my horror fandom, fearing retribution and disparagement. I was sure my investment in the genre would garner sneers and belittlement, as though it were not a respectable field of study. So certain were I of these “facts”, that I may not have pursued my work if not for the tremendous support of the Film Studies faculty and a series of happy coincidences. As a result, I have conducted an empirical study of an under-examined theoretical concept⁴ and contributed to a greater understanding of the filmic spectator and their psychological and motivational attraction to the horror film.

³ Aalya Ahmad, “When the Women Think: Teaching Horror in Women’s and Gender Studies,” *Fear and Learning: Essays on the Pedagogy of Horror*. Eds. Aalya Ahmad and Sean Moreland. (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2013) 56-74.

⁴ The female horror spectator and her consequent status as horror fan.

Chapter One

The Female Horror Fan in Theoretical Discourse:

When the Literature Lacks

Theoretical discourse centring on horror film spectatorship privileges the male gaze and consequently, the male spectator. Many theorists dismiss horror fandom as a pursuit of the young, heterosexual male. The male horror spectator is characterized as sadistic,⁵ delighting in the onscreen terrorization of female victims. There has been extensive investigation into these claims, resulting in an abundance of literature discussing the horror film spectator and the psychological implications of his cinematic preferences. Some theorists condemn horror, as low-brow entertainment and cheap thrills.⁶ Cynthia Freeland⁷ considers horror to be anti-woman and claims that women are always the target of monsters.⁸ However, many feminist theorists have spoken in favour of the horror genre, offering re-evaluations and psychoanalytical approaches to the study of the effects of horror. Barbara Creed's⁹ key theory of the *monstrous feminine* offers such an analysis. Centring on the male spectator and his psychological development, Creed has written about the unconscious and subconscious effects of horror and how symbolic representations in film affect the viewer and his role in patriarchal society. Despite an overtly

⁵ James B. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror*. (USA: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁶ See Part 10 of *The Horror Reader* edited by Ken Gelder.

⁷ Cynthia Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror*. (Colorado: Westview Press, 2000).

⁸ This claim is unfounded- theorists such as Barry S. Sapolsky and Fred Molitor (1996) have quantitatively examined the death-count in horror films and have found that men and women often perish in equal numbers. Rather than a higher frequency of female victims, there is a longer duration of distress experienced by female victims. Male victims are often killed off-screen, or quickly with little visual suffering and strife. Female victims are often sexualized by being attacked in vulnerable states (such as during a shower, while sleeping or while getting undressed). In addition, female victims frequently are chased and pursued by their attackers. When fatally wounded, the female is subjected to degradation, torture or extendedly violent acts. Finally, female bodies (once deceased) are frequently displayed after death, in various spaces and positions.

⁹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. (Oxon: Routledge, 1993).

feminist reading of the horror genre offered by Creed, her analyses are based solely upon the assumption that males are the primary consumers of horror films.

Where are the Women?

It would seem that many theorists believe that horror is not for women.¹⁰ When confronted with the question of why women would avoid and express displeasure for the horror genre, many possible explanations arise. Twitchell (1985) briefly touches on the female spectator, but his analysis suggests that the genre is misogynist and therefore, the female spectator is forced into a masochistic role. The female viewer must witness horrific acts of degradation and violence against onscreen females and he suggests that the only types of females who may derive pleasure from this experience are those who are able to masochistically surrender.¹¹ Similarly, Miriam Hansen¹² considers horror spectatorship to be a dynamic of sadism and masochism. Hansen believes viewers oscillate between sadistic pleasure, by enjoying the voyeuristic experience of watching onscreen individuals suffer, and masochistic pleasure, by identifying with the victim and feeling pleasure in shared suffering. Laura Mulvey's iconic work "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema" (1975) defines and discusses the *male gaze* and onscreen

¹⁰ This is made evident by her absence in theoretical discourses centring on horror film fandom and spectatorship. Absence as presence, as conceptualized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, suggests that the absence of something can allude to its presence, without acknowledgement. The lack of scholarly research in the field of female horror spectatorship suggests that theorists do not consider the topic worthy of critical discourse. Most fail to mention the female horror fan at all, and often, if she is mentioned, it is with negative connotations. For example, Judith Mayne (1990, 1993) has published extensively on female spectatorship, but completely neglects the horror genre. It is the absence of content, the refusal to acknowledge, that inspires suspicion and derived symbolic meaning.

¹¹ In an article for *Georgia Review*, Twitchell states, "[In horror] there is ample time for the boys to practice bravery by biting their nether lip, while squealing girls perfect their own control by surrender" (43). In *Dreadful Pleasures*, Twitchell places more emphasis on the vampire and the female spectator. See his chapter entitled *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Dracula* for a detailed analysis of the sexual surrender of the women under Dracula's spell (which he refers to as "easy prey," 134) and an association between Dracula and the domineering father figure.

¹² As described by Rhona Berenstein in *Attack of the Leading Ladies*, "I prefer Miriam Hansen's conceptualization of spectatorship as an oscillation between sadistic and masochistic poles... spectatorship is a messy matter- slipping between identification and desire, between dominance and passivity" (37).

females as objects of the gaze. For the female spectator to experience any pleasure from Hollywood films, Mulvey (1981) postulates that the women may take one of two stances, often oscillating between the two. The first, as mentioned by Twitchell and Hansen, is the role of passive, masochistic viewer. The masochistic viewer's perspective allows the spectator to identify with the onscreen female and her suffering. However, the female viewer may choose to adopt the male gaze and thereby, succumb to a degree of transvestism.¹³ Through this perspective, the female viewer may enjoy the film as would a male viewer, without fear of punishment, retribution or objectification. Rather than being the victim of the gaze, the female viewer may adopt and accept the male gaze.

Linda Williams¹⁴ considers the female spectator to be a passive entity, one which refuses to return the male gaze and thus, refuses to look. Williams identifies several factors which cause the woman to look away, including a lack of identifiable onscreen representation and her inability to bear witness to violence and degradation perpetuated upon women. Williams suggests that women do not experience pleasure in spectatorship, as they are the object of the male gaze and therefore, they exist as an object at which to be looked, not capable of returning the gaze. In horror, women are punished for looking. The gaze that objectifies the female also is placed upon the monster and with this motivation, Williams finds female viewers may experience identification and compassion for the monster. Like the women, the monster is an

¹³ Further elaborated upon by Rhona Berenstein. Berenstein takes this one step further and theorizes that the female spectator has a performative role in the horror film genre. The female viewer may be masked and unmasked- Berenstein referring to the spectator as indulging in "drag", in that the performative nature of this role is unnatural. The female viewer may choose to observe the film from the male perspective, assuming the male gaze and its consequent effects. Conversely, the female viewer may instead exaggerate her "femininity" and succumb to the conventional, societal expectation that she will be too fearful to look at the onscreen horror. This reaction is both societally reinforced and socially encouraged. The female viewer may then rely upon the male viewer to be stoic and brave, communicating when the horrific scenes have concluded and when it may be safe again for her to cast her gaze upon the screen.

¹⁴ Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks", *Re-Vision*. Eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute), 83-99.

object of the male, patriarchal gaze, observed for its differences and its lack. The monster becomes a spectacle which threatens the male (and thereby, societal order) with its difference. In the end, both the monsters and the women are punished for their transgressions against a male-dominated society. A psychoanalytical reading of horror aligns women and monsters as differing sides of the same threat.¹⁵

The most persistent and persuasive models of horror film spectatorship neglect the female viewer.¹⁶ Female horror fans, on the infrequent occasion that they are mentioned, are reduced to two categories.¹⁷ - the masochistic female viewer and the female who adopts the male gaze, or the spectator-as-drag.¹⁸ These categorical components fail to address the possibility that females may not only actively.¹⁹ watch horror films, but some women may even enjoy horror and pursue this interest with an enthusiasm matching (perhaps, even exceeding) their male counterparts'. This pleasure and enthusiasm may not be derived from a masochistic desire to see their gender, and thereby themselves, punished for their transgressions against patriarchal society. This pleasure may be associated with female identification, negating the necessity to assume the perspective of an alternative gender. The pleasure some women derive from the horror genre may exist for myriad rationales, few of which may be relegated to such a rigid, binary approach (masochism vs. transvestism). This study seeks to examine the possibility that female horror fans have long since existed and require further theoretical analyses. Prior literature in this area has focused on the male spectator and thus, if the female spectator is an existing entity worthy of

¹⁵ "The strange sympathy and affinity that often develops between the monster and the girl may thus be less an expression of sexual desire (as in *King Kong*, *Beauty and the Beast*) and more a flash of sympathetic identification" (Williams, 65).

¹⁶ See Barbara Creed (1993), Carol J. Clover (1992), Matt Hills (2005) and Cynthia Freeland (2000).

¹⁷ See Mulvey (1981).

¹⁸ Spectator transvestism, a concept put forth by Laura Mulvey (1975) and elaborated upon by Rhona Bernstein (1996).

¹⁹ An active viewer, as opposed to a passive viewer, as differentiated by Mulvey (1975).

critical investigation, the canon of horror film spectator literature and feminist film theory may be sorely lacking.

The Invisible Spectator

Feminist film scholarship centring on horror owes much to Barbara Creed and her pivotal work, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Creed utilizes Julia Kristeva's²⁰ concept of abjection and offers a psychoanalytic view of the horror film as representative of patriarchal society's fear of the monstrous female, especially the female's reproductive body. Categorizing different forms of the monstrous woman (from castrating mother to sexualized vampire), Creed is able to re-evaluate the relationship between the onscreen monstrosities and the witnessing spectator. However, the analyses offered in Creed's book are solely dependent upon the spectator being male. The reactionary response from the spectator is dependent upon either identification as a male or aligning oneself with the male gaze.

Creed briefly touches upon the exclusion of female spectators in her theoretical approaches to the horror genre. Creed suggests that if women were making horror films, the content and consequently, the spectator's reactions would be altered. Creed says women do not refrain from producing horror films because they are uncomfortable or frightened by elements of the genre (i.e. abjection), but instead, that the film production industry discourages involvement of females- the male-dominated industry of horror is no place for women.

Creed published this book in 1993. Historically, women have not been heavily involved in the production side of horror film making. However, several prolific (and some notorious) horror films showcasing the production or directorial talents of different women in the industry had been released prior to 1993. For example, by the year 1993 the *Slumber Party Massacre*

²⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1982). Print.

franchise had already spawned three sequels- two of which were written by females and three of which were directed by a female. Despite the overtly masculine gaze employed by the *Slumber Party Massacre* films (including promotional materials, which often featured scantily-clad young women in suggestive and terrified poses, recoiling from a dominant, unseen male assailant wielding some sort of phallic weapon), these films were written by women, made by women, starring women and consumed by an audience of mixed genders..²¹

Creed devotes an entire book to the male spectator's reaction to onscreen horror and abjection as personified by the female body. Yet, no counter-part exists for the female spectator. The exclusion of female spectators is frequently justified by the argument that women do not watch horror. This statement, when explained, is supported by statistical examinations of theatre patrons and their cinematic preferences. This does not take into account the fact that women may not go to the cinema to watch horror films, but they may enjoy the same films at home, with a friend or online.

Carol J. Clover's seminal work *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* promises in its title a discussion of both men and women as they relate to the modern horror film. Given the significance of this text, it would seem crucial that Clover offers discourse on the Final Girl²² and her relationship to spectators of both genders. However, Clover also fails to analyze the female horror spectator, with the brief exception of spectator transvestism. Clover's rationale for excluding the female spectator is simple. She claims that

²¹ Though erroneously thought to be exclusively male, slasher films are consumed by both genders. For further information on female slasher film fans, see Chapter Two and Three.

²² The Final Girl is a horror film archetype emerging in the late 1970s and gaining widespread popularity with the rise of the slasher film. The Final Girl is the sole survivor of the monster's attack. She is characterized as being smart, strong and virginal. She is frequently showcased as being androgynous, oftentimes bearing a gender-fluid moniker, such as Laurie (*Halloween*, 1978), Jess (*Black Christmas*, 1974) or Stretch (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, 1986). Clover details justification for choosing a female as the sole survivor the possibility of male identification with The Final Girl.

despite lacking statistics, when she inquired of cinema and video rental store employees which gender rented more horror, the answer was definitively “males”. Furthermore, she suggests that fan magazines are strictly marketed to male fans; female fans are a strange and infrequent aberration. Clover goes on to state that her work will only acknowledge the male spectator and all other spectators shall be considered “invisible”.²³

Not only are these assumptions generalized and poorly supported, a little research can falsify them easily. While women may have had a minimal presence in the realm of horror film production and fandom at the time Clover wrote her book, women are strongly represented in the field now. Canada’s own *Rue Morgue Magazine* is a horror-oriented publication specializing in “horror in culture and entertainment”. The magazine publishes monthly and features film reviews, advertisements for upcoming horror films, horror-oriented event promotion, pictorials showcasing cutting-edge special effects and interviews with filmmakers, directors, producers and actors. Until recently (2003 to 2009), Jovanka Vuckovic was editor in chief for *Rue Morgue*. Vuckovic is not only a female horror enthusiast; she is an author, mother and most recently, a director. Her first film, a horror fairy-tale entitled *The Captured Bird* (2012), was executively produced by visionary director, Guillermo Del Toro. Single-handedly, Vuckovic dispels the notions that women don’t enjoy horror, that women don’t read or participate in fanzine culture and that women don’t make horror films.

Empirical Research on Spectatorship

Justin M. Nolan and Gery W. Ryan (2000) conducted an empirical study investigating “slasher” film imagery and its differing effects on men and women. The study had participants recount visual imagery from slasher films of their own choosing and they were encouraged to

²³ Clover (7).

recall the most terrifying and memorable portions of the film as well their consequent reactions and emotional state. The goal of this study was to evaluate different types of horrific imagery and themes as they relate to the gender of the spectator. To ensure all participants chose films belonging to the subgenre of “slasher horror”, Carol J. Clover’s definition from *Men, Women and Chainsaws* was provided.²⁴ Participants were asked to describe the horrific scenes from their chosen horror films and then, they were asked to describe their reaction to the film’s imagery. The content of these responses was analyzed word-for-word, calculating frequency of use of specific phrases and descriptions across all participants. A master list of key words was created and each participant’s responses were analyzed in respect to their utilization of words from the list.

As predicted, they found a high degree of overlap in the participants’ descriptions. For instance, both genders used words related to youth or children, such as *children*, *young* or *girls*.²⁵ Female viewers mentioned words closely associated with gothic horror and internalized or domestic horror. Women were more fearful of murderous mothers and fathers, evil children or otherwise dysfunctional family units. Women expressed a fear of domesticated horror; the intimate horror film in which the fearsome entities dwells inside the home (or inside a character). In addition, women were more fearful of films depicting bodily possession and the occult. Nolan and Ryan support these findings with sociological and criminal statistics. Women are more often the victim of violence at the hand of a spouse, family member or otherwise familiar party. Therefore, it is logical that women find incidents of violence in the family home to be more frightening and personally threatening than their male viewer counterparts.

²⁴ “... the immensely generative story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one until he is subdued or killer, usually by one girl who has survived” (1992, p. 21).

²⁵ This is typical of horror, as pointed out by Robin Wood in *The American Nightmare* (1986). Repression (or lack thereof) in children is a common theme in horror as it allows societal conventions and mores to be questioned by the most seemingly innocent creatures.

Conversely, males in society who are victims of violence are more likely to experience an attack from an outside, unknown party. Therefore, it came as no surprise to Nolan and Ryan that the male participants expressed greater fear of outside, external forces and their potential for violence. Common, recurring words among the males were *rural*, *country* and *hillbillies*. Men harboured a greater fear of unknown, rural areas housing feral people, rabid animals, inhuman beasts and devolved people and communities. Men were also more likely to mention rape than the female viewers, regardless of whether the rape was inflicted upon a male or female victim. It is also worth noting, though only briefly mentioned in passing by Nolan and Ryan, one of the most commonly discussed films in relation to male terror is *Deliverance* (1972). While not often defined as a “horror film” (and most certainly not a “slasher” film), *Deliverance* has had a long and lasting impression on viewers, particularly young men. The film tells the story of four city-dwelling men on a country canoeing trip and the terror with which they are met in the backwoods. The men are captured and brutalized by a group of redneck, inbred men. And thus is created a life-long fear for male campers everywhere.

Perhaps, it is not actually a fear of being a victim of sexual violence as much as it is a fear of the external world and the possible infliction of an external threat there within. The horrific acts of *Deliverance* stress external trauma to the body. Similarly, horror films depicting campers being slaughtered or captured by blood-thirsty cannibals represent threats to the external being. Large, phallic weaponry often dominates these films (machetes, scythes, sickles, pitchforks, large knives), these weapons are used to destroy, dismember and penetrate the victim’s body. Even more horrific is the cannibal, who not only destroys the body, but actively consumes it following the victim’s death. By dismembering and opening up the human body in this way, the body is irreparably penetrated. It can be suggested that men fear damage, trauma

and penetration by external forces to the external tissue of the living body. They feel embodying the site of the “wet death”..²⁶ Men fear the body that lacks and the fear of the monster, or the woman who is aligned with the monster or the monstrous, is the fear of the attacker who can open the body, mutilate the body and cause the body to lack.

In comparison, the female viewers would seem to be horrified more by internalized horror or trauma. Female viewers tend to be fearful of possession films, in which the inner conscious of the individual (the spirit, the soul) is imposed upon by an unwelcome force. Women are fearful of the unstable psychological state of the entity embodying the threat. The possibly violent inner impulses of the human mind are more frightening than the potential of outside, external threat. Perhaps, this could be an association with child-rearing and the act of creating life inside the body. Having a baby is meant to be a beautiful and positive experience. Pregnancy is culturally met with a positive response..²⁷ However, the actuality of the situation reveals a parasitic-like experience in which a woman lodges a growing organism, feeding on her nutrients and energy in order to sustain life. The pregnancy concludes with a climactic scene of abjection, in which the internal dweller is expelled amidst a fury of pain and blood. In previous centuries, it was not uncommon for women to die giving life; an incidence which occurs now with much less frequency, but still remains a possibility. Therefore, films that exploit the fear of housing an unwelcome and sinister force inside the body may be horrific to women as it is an invasive and internalized type of horror. A psycho-killer stalking his prey may be horrific, but if he is not a supernatural force; he can likely be halted with a gun, knife or moving vehicle. However, a

²⁶ “Wet death” is a term used by Pinedo (1997) in describing the mutilated body in the horror film and pleasure derived from viewing this spectacle.

²⁷ “You’re glowing!”, “You look radiant!” and “You have never been more beautiful!” are frequently uttered expressions directed to pregnant women.

horrific force that is *inside* the victim is terrifying because of the personal investment of the victim- it is their body.

When describing their emotional responses to horror films, female viewers utilized descriptors such as *fear, horror, disgust, vulnerability* and *isolation*. Men viewers tended to focus on emotions such as *anger, confusion, anxiety* and *frustration*. Male viewers were less likely to admit to feeling fear or horror, where female viewers were quick to identify and associate these emotions with horror films. Assumptions about horror film spectatorship often centre on the male as the primary viewer and consumer of horror films. Women are often disqualified from the horror film audience and when a female is in the audience, it is presumed she is on a date with a male partner who encouraged the film choice. Males, especially in groups, are socialized to refrain from displays of fear or intimidation. Therefore, the horror film becomes a sociological endurance test for men- to test their metal, test their capacity for terror- in comparison to and in the company of other male viewers.

Anthropological Approaches to Horror Spectatorship

Zillman and Gibson (1996) discuss the possible sociological function of the horror film as a rite of passage for adolescent males in modern society. In primitive societies, young men were involved in ritualistic rites of passage into adulthood. Zillman and Gibson describe some of the instances in which young males would be exposed to horrific trials and hardships in order to test their ability to protect themselves, their families and their communities. These tests of manhood are obsolete in modern, North American society. Zillman and Gibson hypothesize that these tribulations still exist, but have been altered to accommodate modern society. Some social practices still draw on these traditional customs, such as fraternities and social groups that have

spoken and unspoken laws of behaviour and processes of initiation. However, these practices occur with increasingly less frequency. It is the belief of Zillman and Gibson that modern society's lack of such rites of passage has led to the creation of other forms of skill-testing and peer assessment. One such practice is the public consumption of horrific imagery- specifically as depicted in horror films. Young males often attend horror film screenings in groups and it would be considered weak or feminine to shy away from the onscreen images of horror and violence. By cheering for the murderers of standard slasher horror, young males are able to gain the respect of their peers in a less dangerous and more socially acceptable fashion (as compared to previous eras wherein a young boy would be expected to hunt dangerous game or indulge in aggressive combat with other males).

The odd female spectator in this equation, as put forth by Zillman and Gibson, exists as part of a heterosexual pair. It is putative that a male may request that his female date accompany him to the cinema to watch the latest slasher horror film. As discussed by many theorists, including Rhona Berenstein and Linda Williams, the goal of such a date is to prove the male's ability to brave the onscreen horror while the female companion should shudder, turn away and succumb to fear for which she shall be comforted by her date. The act of comforting a scared female date is culturally synonymous as a precursor to intimate acts. Thus, the female spectator's role becomes one of emoting fear, indulging in emotional reactions and seeking refuge in the arms of her strong, brave male companion.

Despite the possible cultural validity of the research done by Zillman and Gibson, the unique role of the female spectator is miniscule and relatively inconsequential. If the social convention of attending a horror film is a young male's rite of passage, what is the equivalent for the young female spectator? Drawing further on this work, Zillman and Weaver (1996) discuss

spectator responses to horror films and the possible gendered socialization practices displayed there within. On the whole, Zillman and Weaver found that women enjoy horror far less frequently than men. In addition, male viewers preferred to see onscreen individuals experiencing distress in relation to the site of horror (the monster, the haunted house, the bacterial outbreak). Contrarily, women preferred to see onscreen individual mastering the horror-finding a solution, devising a plan, constructing a trap or otherwise, ending the monster's reign of terror.

Empirical Research and the Female Horror Fan

Brigid Cherry (1999) conducted a study of female spectators and observed their responses, viewing practices and personal experiences with the horror genre. When asked to rank their favourite types of horror films, Cherry found "vampire films" and "psychological thrillers" to be the most popular subgenres for female spectators. On the other hand, "slasher horror", "horror parody" and "serial killer films" came in last. Cherry finds that women prefer atmospheric and psychological horror. Mary Ann Doane (1987) refers to the gothic horror and atmospheric ghost horror as the "paranoid woman's film". These films often depict a female being terrorized (physically, psychologically or both) by an intangible force. Women in these films tend to be neurotic, paranoid, unstable or characterized as weak and vulnerable. Therefore, these women become easy targets for monstrous or horrific forces or people. It is a long-standing societal belief that women prefer these types of horror (in film and literature) above all other subgenres..²⁸

Cherry postulates that female spectators may have a unique relationship with the onscreen monster which allows a form of identification to occur which would not be possible

²⁸ See Rhona Berenstein and James B. Twitchell.

with male viewers. Like Williams, Cherry suggests that women are often aligned with the monstrous and the abject, so when shown a monster grappling and struggling with the patriarchal order, women feel compassion towards the outcast, misfit creature. This concept is elaborated upon by Isabel Cristina Pinedo (1997). The woman, like the monster, is the object of the male gaze. The male looks upon the woman and the monster as a spectacle and simultaneously, as a threat.²⁹ An untamed woman, like an untamed monster, can threaten the patriarchal order so the male must suppress and dominate any threat before it can destroy him. By punishing the female, the male may assert his power, restore the status quo and perpetuate the male gaze. Cherry discussed the female viewer's love for the monster.³⁰ As put forth by Creed, it can be understood that many quintessential horror images and monsters are gendered female (literally or representatively). Therefore, the woman may find in the monster an identifiable onscreen (anti) hero, for which she will feel compassion, cheer on and inevitably, mourn when it is destroyed by man, in the name of the patriarchal order.

In addition to siding with the monster, the female spectator is often expected to identify with the onscreen female characters. Horror is frequently accused of being misogynist, sexist and unnecessarily violent towards women. It is theorized that women who watch horror are masochistic and enjoy the brutality on a submissive level. Cherry found that this was not the case for her study's participants. Many of the women expressed extreme distaste for the partially clothed, unintelligent females of horror. The female viewers recognize sexism in horror films, but grow tiresomely aggravated and frustrated with "dumb women" in horror and eventually, they will even cheer on the deaths of these women. Female viewers are simultaneously attracted to the intelligent and strong women that usually characterize Clover's Final Girl. It would seem

²⁹ See *Chapter Two: The Pleasure of Seeing/Not-seeing the Spectacle of the Wet Death in Recreational Terror* for Pinedo's elaboration on Williams' concept of identification between the monster and the female.

³⁰ See Brigid Cherry's finding in "Refusing to Refuse to Look" (174).

that intelligence, skill and maturity are appealing features to the female horror viewer and women who do not embody these characteristics are considered expendable and unidentifiable.

Theoretical analyses of the female spectator become a process of identification. Mulvey and Williams suggest women are incapable of enjoying horror due to an inability to identify with the onscreen representations. Like Williams, Creed is able to recognize the feminine in the monstrous entities of horror and thereby, women may be able to identify with the monster. Horror films usually end with the death and destruction of the monster, so the female spectators must masochistically align themselves with the monster in order to feel identification. Clover analyzes strong onscreen representations of women, but fails to translate this into the realm of female spectatorship. Nolan and Ryan offers statistical analyses of female spectators, but find themselves supporting archaic and banal theoretical discourses. Zillman and Weaver offer insight into the female spectator's motivational investment in the horror genre, but again stress the generalizable concept that women do not enjoy the genre to the same extent as men. Cherry found particular thematic qualities which appeal to the female viewer, but finds herself merely supporting theoretical framework postulated by feminist film scholars before her.

Breaking New Ground

Some overarching limitations of the aforementioned studies and literature are associated with the spectators chosen for analysis and the methodology used there within. For instance, Nolan and Ryan specifically ask their participants about slasher horror. As theorized by Williams and Doane (and supported by Cherry), women do not tend to prefer slasher horror films. These were ranked lowest in appeal by Cherry's female spectators. Therefore, by inquiring about a film

subgenre known to be considered distasteful by most female viewers, one can expect the study to reflect this aversion. Similarly, these studies often utilize “typical” male and female viewers. Given the societal assumption that women dislike horror, it would be difficult to speculate on how many female horror fans will participate in a study when they are known to be less common in the general population. If a theorist insists that the only women at a horror film screening are those who are in attendance at the request of a male date, the female spectator’s responses will not reflect those of a spectator who has chosen to attend for their own personal pleasure.

To better understand the female horror spectator, studies should focus on analyzing the preferences and responses given by females who enjoy the genre- the female horror fan. It is very likely that fewer women than men enjoy horror. But there are female spectators who do love horror and whose preference for this genre have unfortunately never been rigorously studied. The female horror fan is an under-represented concept in theoretical discourse on horror film spectatorship. Fandom tends to be considered a male pursuit and female horror fans are infrequently referred to, if mentioned at all. However, there is a vast and growing community of female horror fans. These fans run websites, edit fan magazines and engage in intellectual discourses regarding their preferences and interpretations of horror films. Some of them work in the film industry; directing, acting and producing in horror films. Like other avenues of fandom, female horror fans value expertise and trivial knowledge of the genre, often pursuing and seeking out rare and independent films and filmmakers.

The present study draws heavily on the empirical work of Nolan and Ryan. Nolan and Ryan determined what visual representations of horror were most salient to female spectators. Similarly, the work of Brigid Cherry was highly influential to the creation of this project. By analyzing themes and subgenres of horror, one can speculate on how and why fandom is

established and sustained for the female spectator. Additionally, by shedding light on the underexposed realm of female horror fandom, generalizations can be made about the future of the horror genre and women's changing role in the horror film industry.

Chapter Two

An Empirical Investigation of the Female Horror Fan:

What's Blood Got to do with it?

Drawing on the empirical studies completed by Nolan, Ryan and Cherry, the present research seeks to investigate the female horror spectator with an emphasis on the female horror fan. Like the aforementioned studies, this project was meant to assess different themes and subgenres of horror and spectator preferences. In addition, the present project also seeks to investigate the development of fandom, familial reactions to an interest in the horror genre and viewing practices across participants. This study is eager to investigate the possibility that horror is not only a genre appealing to females fans, but that horror fandom is not solely a pursuit of the young viewer. The study intentionally encouraged participation from women who deem themselves “horror fans”, from any age group, level of education or overall interest in the genre. The decision to focus on “fans” rather than cinephiles or academics was based on a comment made by Dr. Aalya Ahmad. During her *Monstrous Feminine* course at Carleton University, Dr. Ahmad mentioned that theoretical approaches to horror must make the distinction between film academic and film fan. One can be both, of course, but they can exist as separate entities onto themselves. The film fan may have no interest in film theory, film scholarship or critique- the individual may be merely a fan of film as an art form, with little interest in divulging the possible interpretations of symbolic content. Contrarily, the film academic may have no personal investment in their chosen area of film analysis.³¹ The choice to focus on a particular area of film may be motivated by extreme distaste or objection with the conventions of that genre or film movement. To gather the most reliable information about women who actively pursue and

³¹ Some theorists actively dislike horror, but write about the genre nonetheless.

consume horror films for pleasure, it was decided that this study would deal exclusively with female, horror fans. It was decided that the most efficient manner for collecting a large sample of data of this type would be to distribute a survey to all interested participants.

i) Methodology

Conceiving the Questionnaire

The initial idea for this project was conceived through discussions about female horror fans with Dr. André Loiselle and Dr. Aalya Ahmad, both professors and researchers at Carleton University in Ontario, Canada. This project had intended to have two distinct phases; the first being a questionnaire about female spectators and fandom and the second phase would have participants view different film clips and provide their personal reactions and responses to the visual material. Unfortunately, time constraints and financial limitations allowed only the first phase to be completed at the time of publication.³²

The study began with the construction of the questionnaire for distribution to the participants. Initially, this questionnaire was to be completed by participants in person at Carleton University.³³ However, it became evident that by allowing participants to complete the survey online in their own time frame, the questionnaire could reach a greater audience. It was decided that participants would be sent the questionnaire via e-Mail and they would fill out and return the survey before the deadline.

³² Ideally, a second phase would still be feasible and nineteen of the original participants agreed to participate in a second phase of the experiment.

³³ It would not have been exclusively completed by students. The university would have offered a relatively centralized location where all participants could meet, complete the survey and return it quickly and efficiently.

Questions and Quotients

The questionnaire involves twenty-seven unique questions, some of which have additional portions (for example, question 12 and question 12a). Fourteen of the questions are simple positive or negative answer questions, while others provide space in which the participant may offer a written, short answer response. Several questions ask for participants to report frequency of certain behaviours (such as cinema attendance, See *Appendix 1*).

The questionnaire begins by asking for basic demographics. It progresses to asking about self-identification as a horror fan and levels of fandom. Fandom questions inquired about fan event and fan convention attendance as well as personal habits related to fandom such as costuming and cosplay,³⁴ use of online fan forums and social media and personal status as collector of films or memorabilia. Though a definition was not provided to the participants, it is considered that a collector is a fan who actively seeks out certain films, genres or memorabilia. Collectors will order independent films from across the world, they will gather at fan conventions to find a rare figurine or they will communicate with other fans to obtain certain coveted items. Not all fans are collectors, but most collectors are fans.

Eager to understand the roots of fandom, the next section of questions focused on childhood exposure to the horror genre. Participants were asked at what age they developed a taste for horror and how their family reacted to these new interests. Furthermore, participants were asked if their interest began with literature, film, television, something else or a combination of the aforementioned categories. By understanding the origins and background of fandom development, many speculations and hypotheses can flourish. There is a prevalent fear in society that young children cannot be exposed to horrific content too early, or parents risk

³⁴ A term used to identify those who enjoy engaging in “costume play”, in which individuals dress up as their favourite fictional characters and assume their persona for lengths of time. This is often seen at Comic Conventions and other fan events.

developmental issues such as trauma, aggression and phobias. By investigating early fan behaviour, a better understanding of the impact of horror on young children may be achieved.

Next, the questionnaire explored the personal relationships of the participants and the role horror fandom plays in their everyday lives. Given that prior literature has repeatedly suggested that women watch horror for the sake of their male partners, the present study examined participants' interpersonal relationships and the frequency and conditions of horror spectatorship. Participants were asked if horror was part of their personal relationships, inquiring if their friends and/or spouses also have an interest in horror. Expanding on this concept, participants were also asked if it is important that their spouses or friends share their passion for the horror genre. This study sought to investigate the importance of fandom in association with personal relationship dynamics. If an individual can share their passion (for horror, or anything else) with another person, their bond and their level of fandom may be strengthened. Participants were asked to describe their frequency of cinema attendance, ranging from "almost never" to "once a week". In the interest of understanding the social implication of horror fandom, participants were asked about the means by which they consume horror. Potential answers included "Alone", "With a partner", "In a group" and so on. Participants were not restricted to one answer and were able to provide several responses to questions like the aforementioned.

The next section of the questionnaire asked participants about their personal preferences. Firstly, they were asked if they would describe themselves as knowledgeable about the horror genre. The following two questions asked for their favourite horror film and the film that they would personally consider the scariest. Prior studies have asked about scary scenes, but they did not offer participants an opportunity to choose their favourite films. By constructing a list of the scariest films as chosen by female fans, one may garner a better sense of what thematic are

considered to be the most frightening. Future research could compare these findings with male fan responses. Additionally, by offering participants the opportunity to name their favourite horror film, they are providing data on what themes and subgenres are preferable to female fans. Participants were asked about film thematics and were provided with a list from which they were instructed to choose their preferences. A space was left for additional comments by the participants.

Horror films are notorious for their use of graphic violence and imagery. Participants were asked about their comfort level with onscreen violence. As women watching horror films, the participants were asked if they consider men and women to have different reactions to the genre. Furthermore, they were asked if being female influences their taste for horror and they were asked to expand in the available space following the question. Participants were asked if they felt that women were under-represented in the horror genre and if the presence of a “strong” female character changes their viewing experience. Again, they were asked to expand upon this answer in the space provided. Finally, participants were given a list of attributes and asked to identify which features they associate with strong, female characters. They were instructed to choose as many attributes as they felt suitable and they were given with a space in which they could insert additional attributes not found in the list provided.

A Call for Participants

Before recruitment of participants could begin, the study required approval from the Research Ethics Board at Carleton University. After completing the Research Ethics Protocol Application, which required a copy of the questionnaire and any promotional material intended for recruitment of participants (in this case, a poster was used) and a few minor revisions to the

poster and questionnaire and acquiring permission from the participants, the study eventually received Ethics clearance and was given permission to proceed by the Research Ethics Board at Carleton University.

Ideally, the participating women would be from different age brackets making comparisons between age-groups significantly easier. It was decided that the questionnaire would only be offered to women from the Ottawa and Capital Region area. For an ideal population sample, it is important to limit the possibility of confounding variables, so this study was geographically restricted to a selected population.³⁵ This decision was met with some disappointment, as there was a great deal of interest in the study and limiting the geographical sample caused many possible participants to be excluded from selection.

Participants were recruited in several ways. Using social media platforms such as *Facebook*, several calls for participants were advertised on the researcher's personal pages as well as more public forums. This led to many "shares", in which other women (and some men) shared the information with others allowing it to reach an even greater audience. The study was also advertised on the *Ottawa Horror* website, as I am a frequent contributor and writer for this website. In addition, posters were put up on the Carleton University campus, especially in the buildings housing the Film Studies and Women and Gender Studies departments. Finally, a second-year World Cinema class was informed of the study and several students participated. In addition, several males from the class informed their partners and friends, who contacted the researchers to be involved in the study.

³⁵ Given my affiliation with Carleton University in Ottawa, it was preferable to limit participant involvement from cities outside the Capital Region. If issues arose regarding participants and their responses, it would be easier to be in contact with participants living close to the area in which the research was conducted. Additionally, this study initially intended to have two parts- the second part involved the same participants watching film clips and offering their responses to the material. It would have been more difficult to arrange clip screenings for participants from various locations. By limiting the sample, ease of communication and accessibility were increased.

The posters (see *Appendix 2*) used for recruitment of participants featured several images of women from iconic horror films (including *The Exorcist*) with the question “What is your favourite scary movie?” prominently scrawled across the top of the poster.³⁶ The poster encouraged females who enjoy horror to contact the researchers to complete the short questionnaire. The poster asked participants to help examine the myth that women do not enjoy horror films.³⁷ The poster was also used on the *Ottawa Horror* website as a means of communicating the relevant information to potential participants.

After collecting the contact information from all interested potential participants, e-Mails were sent out to each person with instructions on how to complete and when to return the questionnaire. The questionnaire was included as an attachment to these E-mails. Of the questionnaires sent out, twenty-two were completed and returned by the outlined due date. Participants received a Letter of Information and a gracious thank-you message for their participation in the study. It is noteworthy that several of the participants requested an opportunity to view the final, published study as they were interested or felt that it was relevant to their personal body of work. It is my intention as the researcher to allow these participants to read the final product upon completion.

³⁶ This question is a reference to the horror film franchise; *Scream* (1996-2011). The films of this franchise are centred on characters that enjoy horror films and often quiz each other on their shared knowledge of the genre. It was the ultimate hope of the researcher that by referencing this horror film, potential participants would feel a sense of shared camaraderie with fellow horror film fans and thereby, heighten their interest in partaking in such a study.

³⁷ The original wording of this statement encouraged participants to help “dispel” the myth that women do not enjoy horror. However, at the urging of the Research Ethics Board, the word “dispel” was replaced with “examine”.

ii) Results and Findings

Age Categories

This study included 22 participants and it was exclusively completed by females living in and around the Ottawa area. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 58, with a mean age of 33. For categorical purposes, the participants were divided into four age groups: Age Group A for participants ranging in age from 18 to 25, Age Group B for participants ranging in age from 26 to 35, Age Group C for participants ranging in age from 36 to 45 and Age Group D for participants ranging in age from 46 to 60. Age Group A consisted of 6 participants with a mean age of 22. Age Group B consisted of 10 participants with a mean age of 31. Age Group C consisted of only one participant, with an age of 37. Age Group D consisted of 5 participants, with a mean age of 50. For ease of analysis, Age Groups C and D will be combined to form the new Age Group C which includes participants ranging in age from 36 to 60, with a new mean age of 48 (see **Table 1-A**).

Table 1-A

Age Groups

Age Group	Age Range (years)	Number of Participants	Mean Age of Group (years)
Age Group A	18-25	6	22 (21.8)
Age Group B	26-35	10	30 (30.4)
Age Group C	36-60	6	47.5 (48)

Female Fandom

Of the 22 participants, 19 indicated that they would be interested in participating in a second phase of the experiment which would include video clip screenings and responses. Three of the participants indicated that they would not participate in a second phase of the experiment. The fifth question asked the participants if they consider themselves to be “horror film fans”. Nineteen of the participants claimed to be fans while three did not. Participants were asked to identify on a scale of 1 – 10, their level of fandom. The average self-reported level of fandom was 8 out of 10, with the vast majority of participants (n= 17) ranking themselves at a level of fandom between 8 and 10. Nine participants ranked their fandom level at 10 out of 10.³⁸ Five participants chose 9, three participants chose 8 and one chose seven. On the lower end of the fandom scale, one participant identified her level of fandom as 5, two chose 4 and one chose 2. For the most part, participants ranked themselves extremely (quite low or quite high), with very few ending up in the mid-range (mid-range would describe the one participant at level 7 and the one participant at level 5).

The next question inquired as to the respondents’ participation in fan events and/or conventions. Twelve indicated that they had been to a fan event, while 10 indicated that they had not. Of the 12 who had attended fan events and/or conventions, three had been once, five indicated attending such events once a year and four indicated attending these events more than once a year.³⁹ Related to the previous question, though not exclusively, the participants were

³⁸ One participant indicated her level of fandom to be “10+” suggesting that her level of fandom exceeds the highest available, categorical level of fandom included in this study.

³⁹ It is noteworthy to mention that Ottawa held its first-ever “Comic-Con” event in May of 2012. Ottawa Comic Con is now an annual event. Given that the participants are strictly from the Ottawa area, it is possible that they may not have had access to such events or gatherings in the past.

asked if they had ever worn a costume to a fan event or convention. Six indicated that they dressed in costume for a fan event, while twelve indicated that they had not.⁴⁰

To better understand the presence of female horror fans in social media realms, the ninth question asked respondents if they participate in online fan forums, websites, blogs or Facebook groups dedicated to the horror genre. Fifteen indicated that they do participate in such online pursuits, while seven indicated that they do not.⁴¹ When asked about film collections (on VHS, DVD or in digital form), nineteen participants indicated that they collect films and two indicated that they do not collect films. One participant chose neither “Yes” or “No”, opting instead to write in “some”, suggesting that her personal collecting habits is specific to certain titles. In addition to film collection, participants were asked if they collect any film memorabilia and sixteen of the participants indicated that they do have film memorabilia collections while six participants do not.

Early Interests and Personal Relationships

Looking at the origins of participants’ fandom, they were asked at what age they had developed an interest in the horror genre. Most of the participants became horror fans between the ages of 8 and 16, with a mean age of 13 (12.6). Eight of the participants became fans before the age of 10. Eleven became fans between the ages of 10 and 19. One participant became a fan in her thirties and one became a fan in her forties. For the most part, the participants’ families did not get involved with their fandom, preferring to stay neutral to their interest in horror (n= 13).

However, five participants were encouraged to be horror fans while four participants were

⁴⁰ Four participants did not answer this question. It is presumed that the participants thought the question was related to attending fan conventions and could not be extended to other fan events or venues (movie screenings, premieres, parties, etc.). Perhaps this question would have benefited from greater clarity of context.

⁴¹ It is noteworthy that many of the participants were recruited through online venues such as ottawahorror.com and their corresponding social media counter-parts.

discouraged by their family. Continuing with questions regarding their introduction to the horror genre, participants were asked by which means did they encounter and consume horror.⁴² Ten participants indicated that their interest started with horror literature, twelve chose horror films and five indicated horror on television.⁴³

Viewing Habits

The questionnaire changed focus to evaluate the viewing practices of the participants. When asked if their interest in horror was part of their personal relationships,⁴⁴ thirteen chose yes while nine said no. Furthermore, participants were asked about the importance of their friends and/or spouses sharing their interest in horror and eleven said it was important while eleven indicated that it was not. Half of the participants consider it important that their friends or spouses share an interest in horror.

Cinema attendance was reported to be relatively infrequent with two participants attending the cinema once every one to two weeks, eleven participants attending the cinema once a month, six participants attending the cinema once every six months and three participants chose “Almost Never”.⁴⁵ Participants were asked to specify how they watch horror films socially. Ten participants watch horror alone; nine participants watch horror with their partner, three watch with a friend, two watch with a group of females.⁴⁶ and two watch with a group of mixed genders.⁴⁷

⁴² Participants were allowed to choose more than one option.

⁴³ The question did not specify as to whether these were horror television programs or horror films screened by network television, or even a mixture of the two. This question could also have benefitted from greater clarity of context.

⁴⁴ Specifically, “are your friends and/or spouses also interested in horror?”

⁴⁵ Once a year was also a possible option and no participants indicated that they attended the cinema once a year.

⁴⁶ “With a group (all or mostly male)” was also option. However, no participants chose this response.

⁴⁷ Participants were allowed to choose more than one option.

Categorical Preferences and Favourites

Participants were asked about their horror knowledge. Sixteen of the participants indicated that they consider themselves to be knowledgeable about the horror genre while six did not. When asked to identify their favourite horror film, many titles were provided. However, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *The Omen* (1976) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) were the most commonly repeated films. When asked to identify the scariest horror film, many titles also arose. However, five different participants chose *The Exorcist* (1973), two chose *The Shining* (1980), two chose *The Ring* (2002) and two chose *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

Participants were asked to outline their thematic preferences⁴⁸ in relation to horror films. Generally speaking, participants favoured supernatural and psychological horror films to gory slasher or monster movies. Nineteen of the participants listed psychological horror as a preference, rendering this category the most popular and universally favoured. Other popular categories were Serial Killer films⁴⁹ (n= 16), Supernatural Horror⁵⁰ (n= 15), Ghost films⁵¹ (n= 12) and Zombie Horror (n= 12). The least popular categories included Exploitation Horror⁵² (n=7), Werewolf Films (n= 5) and Rape-Revenge Horror⁵³ (n= 3, see Table 2-A).

⁴⁸ Participants were instructed to “Choose all that apply” and were offered a space to detail any forgotten subcategories or types.

⁴⁹ Films featuring the true crimes or fictionalized accounts of serial murderers, their rampages and eventual capture.

⁵⁰ Films involving ghosts, spirits, haunted houses or locales, magic, mythological creatures, telekinesis, ESP, paranormal activity, supernatural forces or otherworldly occurrences.

⁵¹ Films exclusively involving ghosts, spirits or hauntings.

⁵² Films with little substance, catering to the visceral horror fans, offering an abundance of blood, guts, sexual activity and nudity. Often made with low budgets and shown on the grindhouse or drive-in circuit.

⁵³ Films depicting an often brutal and violent rape (frequently by a group, but sometimes by a lone assailant) which leaves the victim in a near-dead condition. Following recovery, the victim seeks revenge on the rapist(s). These films are known for being violent, gory and disturbing.

Table 2-A*Preferred Subgenres*

Horror Subgenres	Number of Participants
Psychological Horror	19
Serial Killer Films	16
Supernatural Horror	15
Ghost Stories	12
Zombie Horror	12
Horror Parody or Comedy	11
Classic Horror	11
Slasher Films	10
Vampire Films	10
Science Fiction Horror	10
Possession Films	9
Occult Horror	9
Monster Movies	9
Cannibal Horror	8
Exploitation Horror	7
Werewolf Films	5
Rape-Revenge Horror	3

Violence, Gender and “Strong” Female Characters

The participants were asked to report their level of comfort with graphic violence. Nine participants find graphic violence enjoyable, seven consider themselves to be “very” comfortable with graphic violence and six participants stated that they were “somewhat” comfortable. Of the 22 participants, no one stated that they were “not at all” comfortable with graphic violence.

Participants were asked to reflect on how their preferences and responses to horror may be affected by their gender. Thirteen of the participants felt that women react differently to horror as compared to male spectators. Nine felt they did not. Similarly, thirteen participants felt that being female influences their taste in horror and again, nine did not. Eleven of the participants said that women were under-represented in horror and nine did not agree.⁵⁴ Fifteen of the participants stated that the presence of a strong female character changed their horror viewing experience and seven reported no change.

When asked what is considered to denote a “strong” female character, some key attributes were predominantly chosen. The most popular attribute was “intelligent”, with 21 of the participants choosing this word. Nineteen participants chose “skilled” and fifteen chose “responsible”. Interestingly, few chose “villainous” or “monstrous” (n= 3 for both words) to describe a strong female and even fewer chose “innocent” or “virginal” (n=2 for both words), making these the least popular attributes. Participants were encouraged to add their own descriptors and some words used were “resourceful”, “relatable”, “ruthless”, “resilient”, “tenacious” and “strong-willed” (see **Table 3-A**).

⁵⁴ Two participants did not answer this question.

Table 3-A*Attributes of “Strong” Female Characters*

Attribute of Female Character	Number of Participants
Intelligent	21
Skilled	19
Responsible	15
Kick Ass	13
Protective	10
Educated	10
Athletic	8
Caring	7
Sexual	4
Androgynous	4
Villainous	3
Monstrous	3
Innocent	2
Virginal	2

Chapter Three

The Female Horror Fan:

Final Girl, You'll be a Woman Soon

The findings of this study offer many unique insights into the psyche of the female horror fan. As predicted, female spectators enjoy horror to the same extent as (possibly surpassing) male spectators. Females who actively seek out horror have very opinionated viewpoints about the genre and the woman's place there within. Given the extensive quantity of data produced by this study, it would be impossible to analyze all of the results for the present project. Therefore, this analysis and discussion will focus on the results as they support and contrast the aforementioned literature.

Age Groups

There is an underlying assumption that horror is a genre favoured by young, heterosexual males. This study provides excellent support for the hypothesis that there is a large and growing community of female horror fans. In addition, this study contradicts the presumption that horror is a genre consumed mainly by young viewers. Participants ranged in ages from 18 to 58, demonstrating that women of all ages may have an interest in the genre. Given the available information, it would appear to be a greater incidence of young female horror fans specifically between the ages of twenty and thirty (see **Table 1-A**). A second category of "older" fans also appears, though it is less populated than the first, younger category. There are several possible explanations for such findings.

Firstly, some members of the older group (those women from **Age Group C**) of women would have been children in the fifties and sixties. As discussed in Heffernan (2004), the fifties brought about the age of the television, which led to a substantial decline in cinema attendance. The growing popularity of suburbia led to a migration away from city centers and a rise in home entertainment. The blossoming medium of the television offered entertainment in the comfort of home. However, early television stations had minimal programming and required additional content to supplement air time. Film studios began to sell their back catalogues to television networks and old films began to air on television. Many networks took advantage of this opportunity by broadcasting marathons of genre films and thus, creating careers for television hosts (the popularity of horror hosts and hostesses grew rapidly during this time).⁵⁵

Simultaneously, cinemas and filmmakers began to orchestrate gimmicks in order to attract patrons back to the theatre. Infamously, William Castle would electrify audience member's theatre seats and string ghoulish creatures from the ceiling to fly out above the audience during particularly scary portions of his films. Film marketing changed drastically during this time, emphasizing the necessity of "seeing" the majesty of film at the theatre.⁵⁶ Horror films, in particular, advertised their films as so shocking and terrifying that paramedics would be present during screenings in case any audience members were unable to handle the frights.

The children of the fifties and sixties were inundated with horror- both in their home and at the cinema.⁵⁷ Moving forward in time,⁵⁸ horror experienced another spike in popularity

⁵⁵ See Rhona Berenstein, "Horror For Sale", Robin Wood, "The American Nightmare" and Kevin Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks and Gold* for thorough discourses on the history of horror and growing popularity of the genre as a consequent result of the early days of television.

⁵⁶ See Heffernan (2004).

⁵⁷ In addition to home entertainment and cinema horror, frightening comic books and monster-movie magazines surfaced during this time as well. Toys and movie memorabilia became big business during these years.

during the late seventies through the eighties. With cerebral horror films being made such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Mephisto Waltz* (1971), women were specifically targeted in advertisements and promotional materials. This gothic horror renaissance re-imagined the typical “paranoid woman’s film” by updating the narratives and contemporizing the settings.

Simultaneously, films about possession and the occult, such as *The Exorcist* were receiving critical acclaim and inspiring endless facsimiles. However, it was the release of John Carpenter’s sleeper hit, *Halloween* that truly began a new era of horror films. The 1980s saw a slew of slasher films and sequels, some purposefully indulging in over-the-top gore and camp, some deadly serious and some accidentally comedic. As though history were repeating itself, there was a sudden inundation with all things horror. Monster magazines made a come-back. Trading cards featuring spooky killers and monsters were the rage with pre-teens and adolescents. Music videos would feature guest appearances by Freddy Krueger and other slasher film favourites..⁵⁹ Horror hostesses such as Cassandra Peterson’s alter-ego of *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark*, revived old, B-horror films and breathed new life into rare, campy and forgotten horror titles. It comes as no surprise that during this time, children were fascinated by horror and horror imagery.

Given the popularity of horror during these times, it could be speculated that children from these generations are likely to grow up into adult horror fans. By comparing the ages of the participants in this study, it can be generalized that those in **Age Groups A & B** were children of the eighties and those in **Age Group C** were children of the fifties and sixties. Therefore, it can

⁵⁸ There’s a rather large age gap between the “younger” women of **Age Groups A & B** and the “older” women of **Age Group C**. It would seem that during the late sixties and early seventies, horror experienced a severe decline in popularity. It is worth noting that this is the time period in which exploitation horror and campy horror (such as the Hammer horror films) were at their height of popularity.

⁵⁹ Twitchell expands on the marketing of horror to adolescents and teenagers, drawing on variety examples ranging from breakfast cereals (featuring *Count Chocula* and *Frankenberry*) to popular music videos (such as Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*) in Chapter One of *Dreadful Pleasures*.

be concluded that early exposure to horror films and a society fascinated by horror culture led to fandom in adulthood.

Furthermore, this conclusion is supported by the finding that most participants became horror fans between the ages of eight and sixteen. Thirty-six percent of the participants became fans under the age of ten. Only two of the participants became fans after the age of sixteen. This also lends support for the hypothesis that an early childhood interest in the horror genre is not a phase out of which a fan may grow with maturity. It is also worth noting that the majority of the female respondents' families either encouraged or stayed neutral to their child's blossoming interest in the horror genre. They did not see this interest as a threat or a sign of dysfunction.

Viewing Habits of the Female Horror Fan

Some of the aforementioned studies neglect the female horror fan, justifying her exclusion based on the unlikeliness that female horror fans exist as they are often not present in cinema audiences at horror film screenings. It was suggested earlier that this may be an unfortunate oversight, as not all film fans chose to watch movies at the cinema. Some viewers prefer the comfort of their own home. With the increasing popularity of online streaming, film downloads and services like *Netflix*, spectators are attending the cinema with decreasing frequency. Even before the online movie experience and the abundance of "movie channels" available on satellite services, spectators enjoyed a thriving home video market where they may purchase or rent the titles of their desire with ease of access and varied selection. Many viewers chose to watch films at home rather than attending the cinema. This choice was made for a variety of reasons, ranging from the personal, such as the pleasure of watching in the comfort of the home, to the economical, a night out at the movies can be an expensive event.

When asked about their viewing practices, most participants report infrequent cinema attendance. Fifty percent said that they attend the cinema once a month and twenty-seven percent attend once every six months. Therefore, these women are viewing horror in their homes, likely on television, on DVD or online. One of the main theories brought up in horror spectator literature is women attend horror films at the behest of their male dates. When asked about viewing practices, the majority of participants said that they watch horror films alone. “With a partner” or “with a friend” were not chosen as frequently, but they were still chosen with greater frequency than “in a group.”⁶⁰ It would seem that a standard assumption about female horror film spectatorship is incorrect. Women report watching horror films alone more often than any other method of spectatorship. Additionally, the questionnaire asked women about the importance of their horror fandom in association with their interpersonal relationships. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents reportedly feel that it is important that their partner share their passion for horror. Given the assumption that male horror fans force their horror-neutral partner into watching scary movies, it would be interesting to ask this same question of male horror fans. Do males feel that horror is important to their personal relationships? Previous literature would suggest that they do not. However, it also suggests that women don’t watch horror and if they do, they don’t watch it alone. Both of these theories have been brought into question by the results of this study.

Subgenres and Themes

Both studies done by Nolan, Ryan and Cherry address the subgenres and thematic qualities of horror as they relate to the female spectator. Nolan and Ryan focus solely on “slasher

⁶⁰ “In a group” was a possible answer for this question, but it was asked for the participant to specify if the group is all females, all males or mixed genders. All female groups were most popular, but “in a group” was the least popular answer to this question.

horror” and did not question female fans, opting instead for typical viewers. Cherry examined female spectators and asked which types of horror films held greatest appeal for the female viewers. Both found that women prefer domesticated, internalized and gothic horror. Both studies found that female viewers are drawn to supernatural horror and dislike gory, slasher horror.

The present study conducted a similar evaluation. Participants were given a check-list of horror themes and subgenres with instructions to choose all applicable answers. There was an additional space for respondents to add any other themes or subgenres not included in the list. By far, the most popular type of horror film was “Psychological Horror”, with eighty-three percent of respondents choosing this subgenre. The second most popular type was “Serial Killer Horror” with seventy-three percent choosing this category, with “Supernatural Horror” coming in third with sixty-eight percent. Tying for fourth place with fifty-five percent of the respondents were “Ghost Stories” and “Zombie Horror”. The least popular types of horror were “Exploitation Horror” popular with thirty-two percent of the women, “Werewolf Films” with twenty-three percent and “Rape Revenge” chosen only by three participants, making up fourteen percent of the sample.

These findings differ slightly from the findings of previous studies. Nolan and Ryan found that women were drawn to domestic, internalized horror. This is often manifested through the “Gothic Horror”, but can be evident in horror involving the supernatural, the occult and psychopathology. Therefore, the results of this study somewhat support the findings of Nolan and Ryan. However, occult and possession films were only chosen by forty-one percent. More popular than occult and possessions films were zombie films, slasher films and science fiction horror, among others. These subgenres are not typical of internalized, domestic horror. In fact,

zombie films and slasher films represent an external threat to the external body- a threat allegedly associated with the male spectator. Therefore, it is possible that a gendered reading of external and internal threats in horror may not be a reliable means of analysis.

Nolan and Ryan also found that women are most fearful of horror centred on the dysfunctional family or murderous family units. When the present study asked females to list the scariest film they had seen, several titles came up. The most popular title was *The Exorcist*. The film centers on a child who is possessed and her mother's attempts to find a solution. The mother knows her daughter is at risk of great danger, but she must helplessly watch as a demon possesses the daughter's body. The second most popular title was *The Shining*- a supernatural ghost story about a haunted hotel and a gifted little boy whose father is slowly losing his mind. The dysfunctional family unit is key here; the father comes to embody the threat of the haunted hotel and attacks his wife and child in a possessed rage. Two participants chose "haunted house" films.⁶¹ which deal with an evil spirit invades a family home. Additionally, other participants chose *Parents*, a film about psychotic, murderous parents and *À l'intérieur* (Inside, 2007). *À l'intérieur* is a French film about a pregnant woman who is attacked by another woman who wants to take her unborn child. All of these films deal with the family unit and deviations and perversions to the "natural" family. Be it a killer parent or a threat to the family home, there is significant evidence that women are fearful of films depicting domestic horror and family-oriented terror.

Brigid Cherry found that women chose "psychological thrillers" and "vampire films" to be their favourite types of horror. She also found that the least popular types were "slasher films", "horror parody" and "serial killer horror". For both Cherry and the present study, female participants chose "Psychological Horror" as their favourite type of horror film. However, the

⁶¹ *The Haunting in Connecticut* (2009) and *Poltergeist 3* (1988).

present study found the second most popular choice was “Serial Killer” films, which rank lowest in Cherry’s study. Cherry did not seek out female horror fans; rather her results are standard cinema-attending viewers. Therefore, it is possible that female horror fans are more comfortable with horror and therefore, are unperturbed by inherent gore of the serial killer film. Additionally, true crime television shows and books are often big sellers with women. There seems to be dark fascination with the psychopath in the female population. However, Cherry did not find this to be true. Cherry also found a lot of women choosing vampire films. In the present study, less than half (forty-five percent) selected “Vampire Films”. The vampire has long since been an iconic of horror and women have been swooning⁶² over the fanged counts for well-over a century..⁶³ It would seem that Cherry’s results are typical of the female population’s fascination with children of the night.

Why, then, did the present study not show this trend? Indeed, as is expected of a trend, it rises and it fades. What was once popular will become tiresome and something new will replace it. Then, after a period of dormancy, the trend will rise again. Vampires experienced a mainstream overhaul in 2005 with the publication of *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer and the release of a film adaptation by the same name in 2008. *Twilight* tells the story of misfit Bella Swan, who meets the charming, brooding teen of her dreams. The only problem is that he is actually a century old vampire living with a group of other vampires. In this universe, the vampires live in rivalry with another species of supernatural creatures- the werewolves. The narrative struck gold with young pre-teens and adolescent girls, causing “vampire-mania” in media, merchandise and mainstream culture. The vampires of *Twilight* are hardly reminiscent of the fearful, dark blood-suckers of prior literature and film. The new image of the vampire was

⁶² “But it is women who love horror. Gloat over it. Feed on it. Are nourished by it. Shudder and cling and cry out – and come back for more.” Bela Lugosi, 1882 -1956.

⁶³ Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* was published in 1897 and *Nosferatu* slinked onto cinema screens in 1922.

adopted by several television programs and it seemed the world temporarily enamoured with sexy, sensitive vampires.

When a trend reaches the peak of its popularity, it must begin its decline. Vampires became a parody of themselves.⁶⁴ Considered cliché and tired, viewers are turning away from all things vampire in search of something new. Die-hard fans stereotypically turn away from anything that becomes too popular or too public recognized. Therefore, horror fans were some of the first people to abandon the vampire trend. In the present study, the “Zombie Horror” was ranked as the fourth most popular subgenre. Like the vampire trend, zombies have experienced a recent revival as well. With the release of zombie television shows, zombie parodies and more recently, zombie romantic comedies, zombie culture has been steadily rising. The numbers reported for the present study may reflect the popularity of the trend, or perhaps the participants are just zombie fans in general. Regardless, the decline of zombie popularity has begun and the next mainstream monster is likely just around the corner (or down the dark corridor).

Linda Williams and Brigid Cherry talk about the female spectator being aligned with the monster. It is hypothesized that a specific identification occurs for the female viewer when she can sympathize with the monster. This strange form of “monster love” allows the female to feel pathos for the monster and mourn his (or her) eventual demise. However, the present study did not find support for this theory. “Monster Movies” were popular with less than half of the participants (forty-one percent).⁶⁵ Perhaps, the female identifies with the monster but prefers not

⁶⁴ As seen in eras before, such as in the late forties when *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) was released, which was part of a comedic parody re-imagining of all the Universal Monsters. Dracula, Frankenstein and the Wolf Man are not portrayed as frightening, but as comedic monsters set up for laughs.

⁶⁵ Since a definition was not offered, the term “Monster” can be applied to many different beings. For instance, King Kong and Godzilla are definitively monsters. However, vampires are also a type of monster, as are zombies. Since categorical options were made available for many other types of monsters, it was implicit that this category referred to “Monsters not otherwise specified”.

to witness his eventual demise. It is also possible that this supposed identification is not universal to all viewers.

In the present study, female participants selected “Rape Revenge” films as their least favourite type of horror, falling even lower than “Exploitation Horror”. In Carol J. Clover’s *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, Clover identifies films about females getting revenge, such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1977), as being a potential vehicle for feminist and political discourses on sexuality and gender issues. Though Clover herself does not refer to the film thusly, she quotes a friend as having called *I Spit on Your Grave* a “radical feminist film” (115). Rape revenge films are often described in this manner, suggesting that these films are empowering to women. Often, the onscreen victim is sexually attacked (sometimes by a sole assailant, but usually by a group) and for one reason or another, the law is powerless to help her. Sometimes, she does not seek out the help of the authorities at all. After her attack and healing period, the victimized woman is ready to exact her revenge and spends the remainder of the film hunting down and (usually) murdering her attacker(s). Supposedly, the woman capable of fighting back, capable of getting revenge, is thought to be inspiring to female viewers. However, in this study, the female horror fans did not care for rape revenge films.

When I was first conceiving of this project, I was describing my research interests to a woman I had just met through mutual friends. She asked me about my area of expertise and I told that I was interested in females and fear. She responded, “Do you want to know what women are scared of? Rape. That’s what they are scared of.” At the time, it seemed to be a very simplistic and unoriginal response. However, the more thought I gave the idea, the more it began to resonate.

As discussed previously, Nolan and Ryan suggest that domestic horror is particularly scary for female viewers. Perhaps it is partially due to the invasive quality of the films. A possessing spirit, in the body or in the home, is an unwelcome violation of boundaries. The forceful penetration of the spirit into the vessel (the human body, the haunted house, the evil doll, etc.) is analogous with rape. It is possible that female viewers are particularly disturbed by the unwanted, uninvited presence of a violent entity on the *inside*. Therefore, women who find domestic and possession horror to be frightening may also be disturbed by rape revenge films, unable to find any pleasure in the supposedly empowering act of exacting revenge.

The unexpected popularity of the serial killer film for female fans is a particularly interesting finding. Women are drawn to a compelling narrative and serial killer films depict a mystery which must be solved in order to stop the killer. The mystery may be somewhat superficial (the identity of the killer is revealed) or convolutedly complex (the origin of the killer is revealed and through this understanding, he may be stopped). Female viewers are more engaged with films which required a deeper, psychological investment.⁶⁶

I am reminded of the popularity of a certain television channel called “Investigation Discovery”. This channel features programs related to the exploration of serial killers and murderers throughout history. Some stories focus on love-related crimes (*Wicked Attraction*), some are gender-defined (*Deadly Women*) and some are straight-forward true crime investigations (*True Crime with Aphrodite Jones*). While the infancy of this channel reflects the lack of literature regarding its popularity or spectatorship statistics, I have personally witnessed different responses to the channel. My mother, an avid horror-film buff and serial-killer

⁶⁶ Consider the popularity of the Psychological Horror subgenre and the preference for “Intelligent” female archetypes.

enthusiast,⁶⁷ spends many hours watching this channel. When I visit, I watch with her, enjoying the mix of factual information and dramatic re-enactments. On the other hand, my mother's boyfriend despises the channel and prefers not to watch the programming. During a discussion with several female friends who also enjoy horror, I was surprised to find that these women were not only familiar with *Investigation Discovery*, but they were also fans of the television channel. Additionally, the advertisements played during commercial breaks on this channel reflect their target demographic. Ads for laundry detergent, cleaning products, department stores, beauty products (particularly, "anti-aging" cosmetics) and "miracle product" infomercials dominate commercial breaks. Finally, many of the programs are narrated or hosted by female personalities. As mentioned, there is no literature yet available of the demographics of the channel's spectators. However, given the aforementioned information, it would seem that this channel's target audience is women. Women appear to have a morbid interest in true crime and serial killer films.

The Strong Female

As discussed by Clover, the Final Girl is the surviving female who fights the monster and usually unravels the mystery that leads to his demise. The Final Girl is frequently characterized as strong, intelligent and wholesome, sometimes depicted as androgynous or tom-boyish in character. However, these are not defining features of the final girl. She can exist in many possible manifestations. There is a commonly expressed belief that horror films are misogynistic and women do not enjoy watching female victims being terrorized onscreen. However, Cherry's research found that women are not bothered by (nor are they blind to) sexist violence against onscreen females in horror. In fact, Cherry's respondents found unintelligent females to be

⁶⁷ She completed her undergraduate studies in Psychology with an intent to pursue a career in Criminal Psychology.

irritating and in time, the female viewers will anticipate and enjoy the murder of such irritating and un-relatable victims.

The present study asked the women if the presence of a strong female character changes their viewing experience. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents said it had an impact and the same fifty-nine percent said that horror films are received differently by women as compared to men. The participants were then asked to choose words from a list of adjectives that they feel accurately describes a “strong, female character.⁶⁸”. Respondents were able to choose all adjectives that they felt applied and a blank space was left to add any additional descriptors. By far, the most important attribute of a strong, female character was “Intelligent”, chosen by twenty-one of the twenty-two participants (equally ninety-five percent). Secondly, the women chose “Skilled” with eighty-six percent of the participants choosing this attribute, followed by “Responsible” for sixty-eight percent. The least important attributes were “Monstrous” at fourteen percent and “Virginal” and “Innocent” tying for last with nine percent of the sample considering this a key attribute.

It would seem that women consider intelligence to be the most important attribute of a strong, female character. This finding supports Cherry’s results in which women express their distaste for unintelligent women and their ambivalence towards their victimization. Female viewers identify strongly with an intelligent female character who does not allow herself to be victimized. Additionally, women are attracted to a skilled character. Skill was not defined and therefore, is open to interpretation. However, in the realm of the horror film, a skilled woman is someone who can utilize their pre-existing abilities in their battle against the monster or threat. Finally, female viewers admire a responsible onscreen female. Harkening back to the concept of

⁶⁸ Though it was not implicitly stated, this question refers to the Final Girl, as described by Clover. However, the participants’ descriptions appear to reflect their understanding of the implicit meaning of “strong, female character”.

domestic horror, a responsible woman will not give up her home, she will not give up on a possessed loved one and she will not leave a wounded friend behind. The implied loyalty and strength of character with this term is noteworthy. Female viewers like a woman with a sense of purpose and the strength to carry out the task at hand.

Contrarily to common representations of the Final Girl and descriptions offered by Clover, the female fans did not consider virginal or innocent women to be ideal representations of strong, female characters. Androgyny and sexuality were inconsequential to the respondents as well. The Final Girl is frequently described as a female who undergoes a battle against the monster which masculinizes her. She must shed her feminine weaknesses and fight against the monster, often acquiring a phallic weapon⁶⁹ with which to destroy the evil threat. Female horror fans do not feel that the woman must denounce her gender and prefer to see a woman use her skills and personality to her benefit. It would seem these female viewers are not concerned with privileging the innocent woman either. Horror films have been accused of promoting conservative societal values. The sexualized teenagers who go skinny dipping,⁷⁰ have sex⁷¹ or otherwise misbehave⁷² are punished by the monster and the innocent characters survive the monster's attack, supernaturally protected by their purity and virtuousness. These female horror fans do not buy into this patriarchal, conservative reading of horror. Instead, taking a progressive, feminist approach, female viewers will identify and support the strong, responsible women regardless of her past decisions, religious affiliations or personal flaws.

The female horror fan is a complex being worthy of extensive study. The results found in this study begin to construct the character of the female horror fan. She is a woman of any age;

⁶⁹ Stretch and the chainsaw in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986), Laurie and the knitting needle in *Halloween*, Wendy and the butcher knife in *The Shining*, etc.

⁷⁰ See *Friday the 13th* (1980).

⁷¹ See *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984).

⁷² See *Last House on the Left* (1972), *Halloween* (1978), *Hellraiser* (1987), *Scream* (1996), etc.

however, it is likely that she is in her late twenties to early fifties. She developed an interest in horror at an early age and her family did not discourage her from pursuing this fascination. She enjoys watching horror films, but prefers to stay home and watch movies alone or with a romantic partner as opposed to attending the cinema. She feels strongly about her interest in horror and desires to surround herself with friends and spouses who share her passion. She is a collector and a trivia fan. She enjoys supernatural and psychological horror, but also enjoys serial killer films. She is comfortable with graphic violence- she may even enjoy it. She finds possession and domestic horror to be the most frightening and avoids rape revenge films. She may identify with the monster, but more than likely, she will identify with a strong, female character who is resilient, straight-forward, responsible and most importantly, intelligent. She is not defined by any one characteristic or trait. She is not the female spectator as imagined by most feminist film scholars writing about horror spectatorship. She is a fan and a feminist. She is an evolving and changing entity that deserves further examination.

Chapter Four

A Brief History of the Female Horror Fan:

Horror in the Past, Present and Future

Genres experience cycles of popularity. For a short period of time, any one type of genre may be extremely popular, only to be replaced after being exploited to its fullest extent. When a genre regains popularity, it adheres to some generic conventions while simultaneously challenging others. As a result, the genre may experience a new revival, creating fans who otherwise would have avoided the genre in question. For instance, as discussed in Chapter Three, the popularity of vampire films soared after the release of *Twilight*. However, typical conventions of the vampire film subgenre were abandoned for a new approach. Gone was the inherent darkness and danger of the vampire, replaced by a teen-friendly, emotionally-orientated tone intended to appeal to a wide audience, especially those who were not prior fans of horror or the vampire subgenre. The marketing of the vampire as safe, sexy and evocative of teenage angst and turmoil allowed for a renewed interest in genre and created hoards of pre-teen and adolescent fans.

A Bloodcurdling Beginning

The horror genre has been re-imaged, re-packaged and re-sold to audiences again and again. What started as a horrific and terrifying genre (with early releases of *The Golem*, 1915, *Nosferatu*, 1922 and *Dracula*, 1931), eventually grew tiresome and was replaced by a comical

approach to horror..⁷³ When fans become cognizant of the conventions of the genre, it transformed into a novel entity allowing for growth and changes in reception. With society's fascination with technology and the future, science fiction-oriented horror became popular in the forties and fifties. Soon, this over-the-top horror fell into the realm of cheese and camp, with the release of "giant insect"⁷⁴ and killer vegetable films. Playing up the gimmickry and cheesiness of these films, directors like William Castle began to outfit cinemas with contraptions and effects meant to engage the audience and inspire fans to indulge in the fearfully fun and titillating public experience of horror..⁷⁵ Rising from the kitschy science fiction films and the exploitative "skin films" succeeding in movie houses and drive-in theatres, exploitation horror gained enormous popularity in the sixties. Films featuring copious amounts of blood paired with nudity and sexual themes were common-place and narrative quality was sacrificed for visual effects and aesthetics. Herschell Gordon Lewis directed many films during this time including *Blood Feast* (1963) and *The Wizard of Gore* (1970)..⁷⁶ Gordon Lewis was known for having made the transition from soft-core skin films to exploitation horror..⁷⁷ His films are low-brow entertainment, with painful dialogue, gratuitous nudity and horrific scenes of excessively gory murders and torture.

⁷³ See the Abbott and Costello cross-over films, such as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) and *Abbott and Costello Meet the Invisible Man* (1951).

⁷⁴ See *Tarantula!* (1955), *The Deadly Mantis* (1957), *Attack of the Giant Leeches* (1959), etc.

⁷⁵ For a detailed account of William Castle's publicity stunts and other cinematic gimmickry used to draw in audiences, see Kevin Heffernan's *Ghouls, Gimmicks and Gold*. Heffernan offers an in-depth analysis of the horror film industry in the 50s and 60s, with particular focus on the popularity of horror with young audience members.

⁷⁶ In 2012, I wrote an article for *Ottawa Horror* entitled "Herschell Gordon Lewis: The Godfather of Gore". After watching several of his films with enthusiasm, I felt inspired to write about his rise to B-Movie fame and his lasting legacy in the horror genre. This article is available on the *Ottawa Horror* website.

⁷⁷ His later films such as *The Wizard of Gore* (1970) and *The Gore Gore Girls* (1972) are slightly reminiscent of his early exploitation work in *Living Venus* (1962) and *Bell, Bare and Beautiful* (1963).

The Psychological Horror

In opposition to these exploitative horror films, another type of horror film was emerging. Alfred Hitchcock is often credited for starting the trend of psychological or cerebral horror films of the sixties.⁷⁸ In 1960, Hitchcock released *Psycho*. The film was considered a gamble and few counted on the potential of it being successful. However, Hitchcock was certain it would be popular and he invested his time and personal finances in the film's production.⁷⁹ It was an overwhelming success! The film utilizes minimal gore to tell the story of a deranged young man and his murderous impulses. Despite the fact that the film depicts the murders of a young woman and a male detective, the narrative centres on the unstable murderer, Norman Bates and his internal, psychological state. The film's surprise ending is followed by a lengthy explanation of the mental dysfunction of Bates and how he descended into his murderous madness.

The film is unique in that Hitchcock was the first director to insist that once the film began, no patron would be granted admittance into the theatre.⁸⁰ Prior to this film's release, cinema-goers were welcome to join a screening during any point in the film. Films would play on a loop and if one missed the beginning a film, they could stay to watch it replayed. Hitchcock, however, wanted audiences to be in their seats from the very start of *Psycho* until the climatic end to ensure that the narrative had the strongest, most influential effect on the viewer. This was the first time horror had been taken seriously in several decades. This was not campy or cheesy horror, this was psychological, intelligent and cerebral horror meant to disturb, evoke emotion and terrify audiences everywhere. Additionally, it garnered mainstream success and acclaim. It was the first of its kind.

⁷⁸ Clover, 169.

⁷⁹ Thomas Leitch, "Hitchcock with Hitchcock," *Literature Film Quarterly*, 2003.

⁸⁰ See Linda Williams, "Learning to Scream" (15).

After the success of *Psycho*, Hitchcock continued to release psychologically frightening horror.⁸¹ and other filmmakers attempted to replicate *Psycho*'s success with similar films and poor imitations. In 1963, the slow-burn horror film *The Haunting* was released. *The Haunting* tells the story of Eleanor, a sensitive and unusual woman who had cared for her needy, ill mother until her death. Eleanor leaves her family in secret and joins a group of individuals staying at the stately mansion, Hill House. Supernatural activity occurs and it becomes evident that the ghosts residing in Hill House want Eleanor.

The Haunting is a widely acclaimed and theoretically valuable film. Many film scholars.⁸² discuss *The Haunting* for a variety of reasons. The film is frequently deemed a “female horror” film as it adheres to the definition of the “gothic horror”, features a female protagonist and shies away from gore and spectacle. The effect of *The Haunting* is a cerebral one. The film is punctuated by Eleanor’s inner monologues and the spectator is witness to her psychological state via this device. The product of this formal technique provides a private glimpse of the inner mind of Eleanor which forces the viewer into questioning her sanity. Other characters suggest that Eleanor may be psychotically unstable, but it is never determined whether she is indeed insane or the true victim of a supernatural attack.

Feminist film theorists discuss this film in relation to its treatment of the female characters. Given the exposure to Eleanor’s inner thoughts, the viewer is privy to a distinctly female perspective. Additionally, the narrative revolves around a female and showcases females. Queer readings of *The Haunting* acknowledge the implied homosexuality of Theo..⁸³

⁸¹ Such as *The Birds* in 1963 and *Frenzy* in 1972.

⁸² *The Haunting* is mentioned by Clover, Creed, Hill and White. These theorists also cite other resources, in which the film is mentioned, discussed and analyzed.

⁸³ It is strongly implied that Theo is a lesbian. Her sexuality is never distinctly defined in the film, but her flirtation with Eleanor is apparent and at one point, Eleanor refers to Theo as monstrous- a direct reaction to another one of Theo’s sexual advances. In the 1999 remake of the same name, Theo’s character is more heavily sexualized, but

Furthermore, Eleanor's sexuality is never outright stated. She is drawn to Dr. Markway, but Patricia White (2000, 213) points out that the doctor may represent an absent father figure for Eleanor. As her mother was taken ill, Eleanor was forced to care for the sick woman and thus, Eleanor's life stagnated. She did not marry, nor did she move out of the family home. She was simultaneously forced into perpetual infantilism and responsible adulthood. With the absence of a father in the home, all responsibilities fell to Eleanor and she lost sight of her future. Dr. Markway appears to be smitten with Eleanor, but Eleanor's interest does not reveal mutual sexual attraction. Instead, her exaggerated disgust with Theo's implied sexual orientation coupled with her immediate connection and attraction to Theo infers a repressed or latent homosexual desire.

The very incorporation of subtextuality and the psychological implications of the narrative posit this film into the realm of the cerebral horror. In discourses of female-oriented horror, many theorists use examples like *The Haunting* as representative of the thematic preferences of the female spectator- the gothic horror, the psychological intrigue, the female protagonist, the supernatural forces; these are all features of what some call "women's horror".⁸⁴ Importantly, there is a distinct lack of gore in these films. In fact, *The Haunting's* greatest effect is the lack of a monster or visual onscreen representation of the horrific threat. The women need not refuse to look, as there is nothing to see. Similarly, other such horror films are characterized in the same fashion.

Roman Polanski's film *Rosemary's Baby* can be characterized as a typical female horror. The centres on Rosemary, a young housewife who has just discovered she is pregnant. However,

she identifies herself as "bisexual". It is possible that Theo (of the 1964 film) is also bisexual, or perhaps, she is straight and just overtly flirtatious with everyone. The most likely explanation, however, is that Theo is indeed homosexual and the censorship of the film would not allow for an openly homosexual character to be depicted. However, a reading of the subtext of the film betrays Theo's true sexual orientation.

⁸⁴ See Mary Ann Doane (1987).

her paranoia and suspicion begin to mount as she speculates that the overly-involved neighbours next door have a dark, sinister plan for her and her baby. The film adheres to Nolan and Ryan's concept of the domestic horror.⁸⁵ Rosemary, sick with her complicated pregnancy, rarely leaves the home and becomes a prisoner at the hands of her husband and neighbours. She is paranoid and distrustful, which is validated when it is revealed that her husband has allowed a Satanic social group to impregnate Rosemary with a demonic child. Rosemary's suffering is internalized. Her pregnancy is painful; she loses weight and experiences extreme bodily discomfort during the process. Psychologically, she is isolated while simultaneously confined. She has little control over her own existence; she is at the mercy of her husband and being forced to drink medicinal concoctions made by the lady next door. After being assured that suffering is a normal part of pregnancy, she begs her husband to let her change prenatal doctors, but he flatly refuses. When she gives birth, the baby is taken away from her and she is denied access to her child. It is only when she agrees to submit to the rules and commands of her husband and his Devil-worshipping friends that Rosemary is able to find peace and be reunited with her demonic spawn.

Much like *The Haunting*, *Rosemary's Baby* refuses to show. The film focuses on the internal thoughts, the forceful containment and the psychological state of protagonist, Rosemary. There is an absence of gore, the few scenes of violence occur off-screen. The final moments of the film have Rosemary gazing upon the horror of the demonic child, but the spectator is only granted a view of Rosemary's reactionary response to the child. The film becomes an exercise in, what I would term, "the refusal to show".⁸⁶ In one scene, Rosemary's neighbour is using the telephone in the back bedroom. Polanski purposefully obscures the view of the woman with the

⁸⁵ See page 46 of Nolan and Ryan, also referred to as "family horror".

⁸⁶ I have coined the term "refusal to show" in response to the term put forth by Williams, "the refusal to look". I suggest that if women are expected to "refuse to look", then horror films marketed to female viewers may employ the technique of "refusing to show". By minimizing (or altogether eliminating) the use of gore and onscreen violence, the female viewer may be more inclined to engage with the film's narrative.

doorframe leading to the bedroom. It is said that in the theatre, audience members shifted in their seats, tilting their heads as though they would be able to see the woman better from a different angle.⁸⁷ It is Polanski's highly stylized use of film form that constructs the atmosphere of this artistic and respected classic. It does not indulge in the low-brow horror conventions of overt sexuality and excessive gore. Nudity is infrequently used in the film. Scenes of sensual and eroticized sexuality are depicted which only contribute to the emotive and intimate tone of the film. There are no exploitative representations of women, sexuality or violence. Instead, the film reads as a loving tribute to the gothic horror.

Films characterized as "women's horror"⁸⁸ share similar features and conventions. The plots centre on a woman, whose internal, psychological state is as important as (if not more important than) her position of narrative agency. She is a sensitive and sometimes, tragic character, who is the victim of imposing, uncontrollable circumstances. She is often the mastermind of the home, but feels her place within is being comprised or called into question by a real, suspected or supernatural threat. The psychological stability of the woman is often a topic of the film, harkening back to early atmospheric, horror tales of women being driven insane.⁸⁹ The films usually hinge on some sort of mystery, puzzle or conspiracy which the intelligent female character must resolve before the horrific threat overtakes her.

Additionally, these films are traditionally recognized to refrain from horrific depictions of gore and violence. However, the horror genre of the 1970s was shifting and a new style of horror film was beginning to gain popularity. The emergence of the gory, slasher film was thrilling and terrifying audiences while simultaneously converting a new legion of fans. Psychological horror

⁸⁷ After having heard this anecdote, I attended a screening of *Rosemary's Baby* at the Mayfair Theatre in Ottawa, Ontario. Sure enough, during the scene in question, every audience member in my field of vision tilted their heads to resolve the obstructed view.

⁸⁸ Other examples include *Gaslight* (1944), *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) and *Rebecca* (1940).

⁸⁹ See *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, published in 1892.

film conventions were being coupled with exploitation horror style and effects to help construct this new hybrid genre. The slasher film sought to introduce a monster (sometimes supernaturally gifted, but frequently just a deranged human) whose psychological dysfunctions cause them to murderously attack. By offering an explanation for the monster's brutal violence, the films were able to elicit pathos and understanding for the monster,⁹⁰ while simultaneously depicting his vicious rampages to a gore-loving audience.

The Slasher Film

It has been suggested that women are not fond of the slasher horror genre.⁹¹ By comparing these gross-out, gore-heavy films to the haunting, cerebral "woman's horror", one may discern how the slasher fails to engage the female spectator. Cherry discusses the woman's intellectual attraction to certain genres and subgenres of films. Mulvey talks about the "male gaze" and how Hollywood forces the male's perspective on the viewer, regardless of genre. Therefore, Cherry hypothesizes that certain films construct and present the "female gaze" and these films are immensely popular with female viewers. In regards to horror, women are drawn to the "gothic horror" because it is told from a relatable perspective and does not reinforce the male gaze. Noël Carroll (1990) suggests that horror is like Greek tragedy. It is not the suffering of horror, nor the tragedy of Greek tragedy that is appealing to the spectator, especially the female. Women are drawn to an enigma. When the film posits a mystery which must be solved in order to determine the murderer, to unmask the killer, to stop the monster, the female spectator is more interested in the solving of the riddle, rather than the means to an end. This theory is

⁹⁰ See Williams, 63.

⁹¹ See Cherry, Williams and Clover.

supported by the findings of Zillman and Weaver, who discovered that women prefer to watch horror films in which characters master the horror. Alternatively, males are more interested in seeing the suffering and the brutality of the horror. This theory is further supported by Rhona Berenstein in her investigation of early horror reception and marketing. Berenstein says early female horror fans were thought to be the same individuals who enjoyed detective stories and radio mysteries.

Therefore, the lack of intrigue inherent in many slasher films is bound to leave female horror fans feeling dissatisfied. These films showcase half-naked women, screaming and panicking over a masked murderer, who wields a phallic weapon and never seems to die. The films frequently indulge the male gaze, pausing to objectify an attractive woman's partially-nude body moments before her grisly death. There seemed to be little attraction for the intelligent, astute female viewer. The female spectator has been called passive.⁹² and given the situation, she is understandably so. When there is no mystery, no relatable characters and no pleasurable gaze for the female viewer, she will fail to engage with the narrative. While it appeared that the female spectator was merely disinterested in the horror genre, it is possible that her disinterest stemmed from an inability to find a relatable, onscreen representation of femininity.

In 1978, when Jamie Lee Curtis stabbed, kicked and screamed her way through *Halloween*, it was evident that a new archetype of the female in horror was emerging. Clover talks about the slasher film's inclusion of a new female character type. This is the strong, resilient women who survives the killer's murderous rampage and finally, uncovers his weakness and destroys him. Clover calls this character the Final Girl and devoted a portion of her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws* to describing the Final Girl and her relationship to the (male) viewer. The Final Girl exists in many manifestations and at this point in time, she has become a

⁹² See James B. Twitchell.

generic, conventional expectation for the viewer. However, there was a time when the female viewer had no identifiable female survivors, so the inclusion of this new archetype has changed the reception of slasher films for some women.

The New Woman's Horror

Suddenly, slasher films had a chance to redeem themselves with female horror fans. However, the inclusion of a strong female heroine was only the beginning. After experiencing a meta and self-reflexive period in the 1990s,⁹³ the horror genre began to transform again with a greater female presence. Not only were women onscreen, but women were writing, directing and producing horror films. These films became more popular with female horror fans because they resonated in a way that was reminiscent of the first wave of feminist female horror of the 1970s.⁹⁴ In 2000, an unusual horror film equating menstruation with lycanthropy was released. *Ginger Snaps* is a Canadian-made werewolf film which depicts a pair of inseparable sisters who are attacked by a beast which causes one of the sisters to slowly turn into a werewolf. Though the film's director was male, it was co-written and co-produced by women. The film's thematic- familial dynamics, sisterhood, puberty, menstruation, blossoming sexuality, social complexities, misanthropy- are all associated with femininity and women's roles in society. The film is clever and quick-paced, providing both laughs and thrills for the audience. The use of gore is complex. While the film is not excessively gory, there is a reliance on special effects and the onscreen carnage is creative and disturbing. If ever existed an intellectual employment of gore, it exists in *Ginger Snaps*.

⁹³ The *Scream* franchise characterizes this trend.

⁹⁴ This is evident by analyzing data from the present study. Two of the participants acknowledged becoming horror fans later in life. Mathematically, they would have become fans in the early 2000s. At this time, the horror genre was experiencing changes which would lead to greater appeal for female horror fans.

This film was unique in many ways. The association between menstruation and monstrosity (as dually represented by womanhood and lycanthropy) is a clever and innovative one. Centring on two social outcasts, the film showcases intelligent young women struggling with their positions in society. The girls are smart, but depressive and talk about killing themselves out of boredom and a genuine desire to be released from a conceptualized suburban hell. Combining their obsession with death and their collective intelligence, the sisters construct elaborate artistic projects depicting representations of death, decay and suicide. The film can be read as an allegory for the female horror fan. Frustrated by her inability to assimilate to standard representations of horror fans, the female seeks out ways to express and rectify this conflict. Since she cannot fit into the genre as it exists, the genre must be adapted to fit the female. Thus, with the release of *Ginger Snaps*, a new subgenre of female horror began to emerge.

Cerebral Gore and the Girls

The new subgenre of horror is a hybrid of the cerebral woman's horror and the slasher film/Final Girl subgenre. These films stand as evidence that it is not the content of slasher films that made them unappealing to female fans.⁹⁵ Instead, it was the employment of the thematic tactics which were considered questionable. The lack of a female gaze apparent in many slasher films may disqualify the female fan from entirely engaging in the narrative. The new subgenre often utilizes the female gaze by purposefully denying the male gaze or satirically employing the

⁹⁵ I was lucky enough to audit Dr. Ahmad's *Monstrous Feminine* course in the summer of 2012. One of the films chosen to be screened was *Ginger Snaps*. The group responsible for presenting the film consisted of four females. These girls were giddy with excitement and engaged in a long and fascinating discussion about the film with the rest of the class. Most of the students enjoyed the film and offered their opinions on how it was relatable and original. It was one of the only films in the class which was met with a seemingly unanimous positive response from the group of the students, particularly the female students.

male gaze as commentary on its undesirability.⁹⁶ The films may be written, directed or produced by women, usually starring women and marketed to women. The films tend to indulge in a borderline-excessive use of gore and violence, but in a more stylized and artistic.⁹⁷ manner. In fact, the films themselves tend to be highly stylized and artistic on the whole.

Most importantly, these films are informed by a generic, intertextual history. The females creating these films are horror fans and enthusiasts who have watched Marion Crane shower, went to prom with Carrie, shared concern for Rosemary's unborn baby and witnessed Stretch's chainsaw dance. These are women who came to re-evaluate their place in the horror genre, or lack thereof, and chose to carve out their own subgenre to call home. These are women who can speak and listen to fans because they too have indulged in fandom. Finally, these are women who support one another and want to see the horror genre flourish and grow with a new generation of female horror fans.

In 2013, Canadian-born twins Jen and Sylvia Soska wrote and directed their second feature film. The independent film has become a nationwide success.⁹⁸ and continues to gain fans worldwide. *American Mary* tells the story of medical student, Mary Mason who is studying to become a surgeon. Despite her innate talent for the work, she is financially struggling and considers employment as a stripper in desperation for money. Her first night on the new job is not what she had expected, when a wounded employee shows up and she is forced to use her

⁹⁶ There are times when the male gaze is not subverted or questioned, such as in the 2009 film *Jennifer's Body*. The campy horror film makes full use of the male gaze. However, it is worth noting that this film was poorly received (review aggregator website *Rotten Tomatoes* gives it a 42%- stating it fails to be funny or scary). There may be an alignment with horror films that are popular with female fans and Cherry's concept of "quality". Future research could examine this link.

⁹⁷ The use of gore becomes inconsequential. The focus is upon the narrative and the character development of our heroines and/or monsters. When gore is used in excess, it is not intentionally repulsive, but rather supports of narrative.

⁹⁸ When the film was released in select cities, fans cried out over Facebook and Twitter lamenting the lack of availability in their city. Included in the promotional material for the film, many fan and critics' praise adorned the posters and DVD cover. On the film review website, *Rotten Tomatoes*, *American Mary* has a rating of 55% Fresh and its description praises the visual aesthetics and style of the film.

surgical skills to keep the man alive. Though she is paid handsomely for the work, she is fearful of the consequences of her actions. When a plastic surgery patient contacts her for some unique procedures, Mary agrees to perform severe body modification (the removal of breasts and sealing of the vaginal orifice) for a large sum of money. Hoping to return to her normal life, Mary's enthusiasm for school is renewed and her professors invite her to a special party for surgeons. However, at the party she is drugged and raped on camera. Mary decides to exact her revenge. She drops out of medical school and kidnaps her professor-rapist. Concurrently torturing the mutilated but not dead rapist and gaining a reputation for her incredible body modification procedures, Mary finds herself the desire of many strange clients. The film ends with Mary deciding to leave town with her love interest and start a new life in California. However, upon arrival home, Mary is attacked by the husband of her first official client- the woman who had her breasts removed and vagina sealed. The husband fatally wounds Mary and she dies stitching her own wounds.

The film's tagline is "She's an artist", which appeals to the artistic and aesthetic sensibilities of the viewers. Visually, the film is a combination of beautiful shots and visceral horror. Mutilated bodies, copious amount of blood and severed limbs are juxtaposed with images of beautiful women (several of which are strippers) and dazzling clothes. Mary, even when destitute, wears expensive high heels and high quality garments. Female viewers will notice these details, spending time to admire and gaze upon these objects with a lustful eye. The film opens, closes and is punctuated by the use of beautiful opera music. This is juxtaposed by the incorporation of heavy metal music, used during scenes representing the body modification community and clientele, and sleazy, slow dance music, utilized by the strippers and for Billy's fantasy sequences. The inclusion of high-brow musical accompaniments implies that the film is

of a higher quality than typical slasher horror. However, the mixing of musical genres is representative of the clash of the slasher horror with the cerebral female horror.

The film is a bleak portrait of greed, lust, vanity and sexuality. The women of the film are strong, confident characters with power and influence. Mary transforms from helpless victim to entrepreneur and finds wild success in her chosen field. Her power is that of intellect and sexuality. She is unemotional; failing to react to most any situation especially following her sexual attack. She dresses provocatively, especially when performing surgery, though she does not flirt nor express attraction to any characters. Her love interest, Billy, owns the strip club at which Mary conducts her body modification business. Billy has regular fantasies about Mary, sometimes depicting himself in a masochist position where Mary seduces him and then, stabs him. However, Mary seems to have no real desire for Billy. After hearing of her grandmother's death, Mary seeks consolation from Billy but finds him with another woman. Mary follows the woman to the strip club's bathroom, brandishes her surgical tools and appears to be plotting to kill the other woman. However, she eventually lets the scared woman escape and returns to her emotionless existence.

The cold, robotic quality of Mary is an informed contrast to the typical, hysterical woman of the woman's horror film. Female members of society are often aligned with emotion and affect. The Soska Sisters' decision to utilize a woman who lacks these stereotypically feminine traits was a potentially risky one. If women could not relate to Mary, the film may not have been a success. However, something about the strange character of Mary Mason drew female fans to screenings of the film and the film's fan reception has been overwhelming positive.⁹⁹ This

⁹⁹ Many fans of the Twisted Twins have offered their unsolicited praise for the film via social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. While critical reception of the film hasn't been entirely positive, the fans appear to be overwhelmingly impressed with the directorial talents of the Soska sisters and Katharine Isabelle's chilling performance as Mary Mason.

comes from the Soska Sisters' unique investment in the horror genre. Both sisters are fans who regularly attended comic conventions and fan events. The sisters engage in a variety of social media platforms and speak directly to their fans via Facebook and Twitter. They have an understanding of social media and marketing and utilized the internet to promote their film's release. After the DVD release of *American Mary*, the Soska Sisters hosted an online meet-up on Twitter where fans watched their personal copies of the film in a grand-scale, synchronized viewing event. Sylvia Soska later bragged that they "crashed Twitter" and announced how proud this made her and her sister. ¹⁰⁰

The new subgenre of female horror seeks to combine the popular slasher subgenre with the cerebral, psychological film. These films are aesthetically pleasing and reflect women's presence in and preference for high-brow art, culture and aesthetics. ¹⁰¹ However, these films are also visceral and gory, reflecting a desire to re-appropriate abject depictions of gore for the female audience. The films make social commentary on gender and sexuality, while pushing boundaries and encouraging novel approaches to gender representations. Intended to appeal to the intellect and utilize the female gaze, these films allow for an increased probability that the female viewer will identify and relate to the onscreen women. This new subgenre is breaking ground and taking important steps toward redefining the horror genre. Since this new subgenre is only just beginning to emerge, further research and assessment must follow.

¹⁰⁰ See the *Twisted Twins* Facebook page for this statement.

¹⁰¹ Participants in Cherry's study expressed a preference for films of quality. Quality, as defined by Cherry and her respondents, is "high production values, in art direction, set design and costume... acting was frequently mentioned... however, the quality of a film was determined by plot and character development" (172).

Conclusion

Back to the Boneyard

The research project outlined in Chapter Two was completed in the hopes of providing previously unknown insight into the theoretically under-examined female horror fan. This study was informed by the literature that came before it, specifically drawing on the empirical investigation of horror spectators in Nolan and Ryan and the assessment of female horror fans by Brigid Cherry. Particularly, the findings of Brigid Cherry acted as a catalyst for the ideas and methodology that characterized this study. However, Cherry's findings are the victim of temporal limitations. Cherry published her study in 1999. Nearly fifteen years later, the horror genre has grown by leaps and bounds. Particularly, as outlined in Chapter Four, a new subgenre of visceral, cerebral woman's horror has emerged, arguably started by *Ginger Snaps* in 2000. Therefore, Cherry's findings do not reflect the present state of the horror genre and the identity of the female horror fan as a progressive and fluid one. For instance, Cherry found that women generally disliked visceral, slasher horror. However, the female-oriented slasher film had not yet come into its own and therefore, her analyses may require updating.¹⁰² In the present study, none of the women said they were uncomfortable with graphic violence. Instead, most indicated a high level of comfort with, and even an enjoyment of, gore and violent imagery.

¹⁰² It is worth noting that ten of participants from this study listed "Slasher" films as a preferred horror subgenre. They were not asked to specify if this includes only newer slasher films. However, several participants mention the original *Black Christmas*- a slasher horror from 1974. This horror film utilizes minimal gore and features a "final girl". However, Jess' status as Final Girl can be argued. While she is the final surviving female, the end of the film suggests that she is about to be murdered, or has been already, once the telephone begins ringing. Therefore, *Black Christmas* is more aligned with a typical slasher film than the present manifestation of the progressive, female-friendly slasher. For these reasons, one cannot definitively state that women disliked slasher films in previous years and only recently, began to like the subgenre. However, it can be suggested that women feel an increased sense of identification with onscreen characters in the newer slasher subgenre.

Naturally, the present study had many limitations of its own. The more glaringly obvious limitation is a demographically restricted one. The study only included females from Ottawa and the Capital Region. Therefore, the findings included in this work are reflective of a small sample of the female horror fan population. However, even a small sample is generalizable. Regardless, there may be geographic or cultural factors which differently influence the reception and preferences of female fans. These possible variations could not be measured by this study. Additionally, the study sought to include women from all age brackets and levels of education. However, given that the study was advertised at a large university and online, participants will either be students or women with access to the internet and an interest in horror-oriented organizations and social media groups. In present society, most people have access to the internet and fans are more likely to stream films, order content and merchandise online and participate in online fan forums for their chosen hobbies and interests. Therefore, this may not have been a limitation as much as an unavoidable occurrence. Additionally, most of the participants were close in age to the primary researcher. Personal friends and acquaintances were not discouraged from participating, so it is likely that there were a high quantity of women aged twenty-five to thirty exposed to the study's advertisements. This is reflected in the ages of the participants. However, despite these limitations, participants from a variety of age brackets eagerly contacted the researchers in hopes of participating in the study.

Another limitation to this study is the exclusion of male participants. Given the study's interest in female horror fans, it is acceptable to focus on females exclusively. However, for comparative measures, this study's findings had to be contrasted with the results from male respondents in the empirical research published by Cherry, Nolan and Ryan. As elaborated upon in Chapter Three, in many ways the results from the present study challenged the findings of

previous publications. Therefore, it is possible that if this same questionnaire were to be administered to male participants, the results may also contradict the findings of Cherry, Nolan and Ryan. There would have been beneficial advantages to compare the responses of male participants to those of the females. Nevertheless, the main crux of this thesis is the absence of the female spectator in horror theory and the over-representation of the male viewer. Therefore, exclusion of the male served to challenge convention and shift focus to a strictly female perspective.

Additionally, by restricting the involvement of male participants, this study can employ the feminist goal to deny and subvert the male gaze, in favour of a female gaze. The female horror fan's gaze is characterized by the women's refusal to refuse to look. The female fan consumes horror images without turning away from the screen. She is not succumbing to the male gaze, nor is she indulging in masochistic pleasure from onscreen visions of suffering. The female gaze is a scrutinizing one, evaluating horrific imagery for representations of strong femininity and visceral intrigue, while maintaining a critical distance from content too intimately reflective of pessimistic representations of the female's place in patriarchal society. The female fan values intelligence and intellect, refusing to identify with foolish or obtuse representations of their gender. A female fan will identify with a strong, skilled male character before a weak, unintelligent or ambitionless female character.

The literature examined for this study constructed a characterization of horror fandom as a male pursuit which purposefully and violently rejects the feminine influence. Drawing on cultural assumptions that women are incapable of deriving pleasure from horror films; previous literature neglected the female horror viewer (and particularly, the female horror fan) and dismissed her as an unlikely aberration, unworthy of examination, if existing at all. This present

study (along with work by Cherry and Berenstein) offers conclusive evidence that women not only enjoy horror, but some women are so drawn to the genre that they inundate themselves with the aspects of the genre including filmic texts, critical literature, fan-oriented events and groups and the collections of films, memorabilia and trivia regarding their favourite titles.

Women have a unique and unusual investment in the horror genre. As put forth by Julia Kristeva and expanded upon by Creed, some women may harbour a familiarity and level of comfort with the concept of abjection. Women give birth to babies. The act of growing a living being inside the body is wholly abject, especially upon labour when the body expels the baby and the surrounding, protective shell. The passing of blood is normal for the female, as the woman who is not carrying a child will menstruate for five to seven days per month. The ritual of menstruation is purposefully kept discreet, with women being discouraged from talking about menstruation in public spaces. Societal conventions prohibit the open discussion of menstruation, preferring to see it as a shameful and degrading deed, which must be kept hidden at all costs. The mere beginning of a tampon commercial elicits giggling and immaturity in many young men. The mystery of menstruation is negatively perpetuated by the social convention of ascribing aggressive and irrational female behaviour to the menstrual cycle. By attributing these types of behaviours to hormonal and thereby uncontrollable facets of womanhood, females are stripped of a degree of power. If a man becomes violent and aggressive, he is powerful and determined. If a woman does the same, she is irrational and pre-menstrual, thereby rendering her convictions void.

Women's need to shroud their mastery of abjection in secrecy, "to hide the blood" so to speak is analogous with their seeming compulsion to hide their fandom. For every woman loudly proclaiming her love of horror, there are three quiet ladies conceiving to "hide their blood", or

disguise their pleasure derived from the genre. Dr. Ahmad posits that women have been unfairly denied status as horror fans due to the lack of female presence in horror film screenings at theatres and cinemas (58). Drawing on her own personal experiences, Ahmad supports Cherry's statistics that women watch horror at the cinema less frequently than by any other means (at home, on video-cassette, with a friend, etc.). Berenstein talks about early horror films and the fact that it was considered unacceptable (that is, inconceivable, unladylike and vulgar) for women in society to pronounce a love of horror, terror and gore. Therefore, if a woman enjoyed horror films, she would be required to remain silent and perhaps, even performatively protest attending a screening. The affect¹⁰³ of fear is associated with femininity and a woman showing fearlessness is not considered attractive or becoming. The taboo status of female horror fan allowed for the development of a "guilty pleasure". The pleasure of indulging in horror films or horror literature strengthened the appeal of the genre for some women. It became a forbidden temptation, indulged upon in secrecy and likely, shared with fellow enthusiastic girlfriends. The appeal of the mystery subplot of the horror film has been associated with female fascination, cementing a female fan's interest in the narrative. The elusive and taboo act of being a secret horror fan may have had additional appeal for female viewers. A guilty pleasure is no longer pleasurable once it has been confessed and made public.

After completing this project, I accompanied a female friend (also a horror fan) to a screening of the new horror film, *The Conjuring* (2013). The film tells the story of husband and wife paranormal investigators and their encounter with a haunted house. The film involves a family unit (new residents of the haunted house), psychically gifted women, possessed people and objects, as well as infanticide, witchcraft and demonology. Upon arrival at the cinema,¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ The word "affect" is purposefully used here, as it relates to emotional state and not the repercussive result.

¹⁰⁴ It is worth noting that this film had been out for two weeks prior to our excursion to the cinema.

my friend and I were astonished to find the theatre to be nearly full. So full was the room, that an individual was perching on the steps beside his friends, instead of being seated elsewhere..¹⁰⁵

Upon realizing we may not be able to sit together; my friend and I scoured the theatre for two empty seats. Suddenly, I could see two women gesturing to me from across the aisle. I didn't recognize the women, but I made my way towards them, friend in tow. Upon arrival, my suspicion was confirmed- I did not know them. However, they noticed two empty seats in front of them and were kind enough to alert me to their presence. The sense of camaraderie was strong. As I gazed back at the crowd (from our second row seats), I noticed something. It was almost exclusively female! Including the male seated on the stairs beside the aisle, I counted fifteen men.¹⁰⁶ in the audience and the rest were female. Most of the men appeared to be with a group or a lone female. As the film ran, women screamed, hollered, laughed and cheered. The audience was particularly rambunctious. I pride myself on my nerves and I found myself jumping during the scary scenes- not from fear of the onscreen ghosts and spectres- but from fright of hearing the woman beside, behind me, scream and shriek. As I left the theatre listening to the enthusiastic chatter of the giddy, gleeful and impressed patrons, I realized I was standing amidst my research findings come to life!

The theatre was full of women. The women were drawn to this paranormal film, which dealt with themes of domestic horror, possession, supernatural encounters and familial strife. A secret mystery had to be solved and the psychological investment of the spectator was vital. The gore was minimal, but existent. Most importantly, the women were looking. They may have been screaming and jumping in their seats, but they were facing the onscreen horror and revelling in a

¹⁰⁵ Though I did not witness this occurrence, I speculate that he would have been asked to move due to the fire safety precautions employed by the cinema.

¹⁰⁶ I do not claim that this number is entirely accurate. The theatre was dark and I was taking note of the gender of the audience merely in passing, unaware that it would end up mentioned in my thesis.

delight achieved there within. These were female spectators, these were women who watch horror and these women couldn't get enough.

Understanding the complexities of the female horror fan will be a long and extensive process. Given the basic lack of information about the willing female spectator, it is crucial that research in this area continues and progresses. Future research should delve deeper into the psychological motivations of the female horror fan. This study was unable to draw a distinct line between what about horror is pleasurable, what about horror is scary and how do the two experiences differ for female viewers. If the horror fan becomes desensitized to the gory and horrific imagery, do they still enjoy the genre and on what levels? There may be a relation between fear and fandom. This area is worthy of examination and speculation. Furthermore, future research should comparatively approach female fandom and male fandom. Despite the fact that the majority of the literature regarding horror fan spectatorship centres on the male viewer, it is likely that many of these studies are out of date and would benefit from new assessments. With the purposed new subgenre of visceral, cerebral women's horror, male fans may have new opinions on the progressive changes made to the horror genre in recent years. The horror genre has received extensive attention in academia, in the media and in the past. The focus must shift from a content analysis of the filmic text to an assessment of the realm of horror fandom and women's changing role in the genre.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: The Questionnaire

Instructions:

Please fill out this questionnaire to the best of your ability. If you do not wish to answer a specific question, please leave it blank. For questions with multiple answers, please **BOLD** or place an “X” beside your answer(s). Save a copy of this document and return as an attachment to amy_vosper@carleton.ca .

Please return on or before March 13th, 2013. If you require more time or have any questions or concerns, please contact Amy Jane Vosper at the e-Mail address provided.

Thank you for your interest and participation in this study.

Questions:

Gender:

Age:

E-Mail Contact:

Are you willing to participate in a second part to this experiment involving viewing film clips and providing your responses? (Please **BOLD** or place an “**X**” beside your answer)

Yes No

Do you consider yourself to be a fan of horror films?

Yes No

How would you rank your degree of fandom (how much of a fan do you consider yourself to be?)

(0 = Not a fan, 1 = Mild fan, 5 = Moderate fan, 10 = Huge fan)

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Have you ever attended a fan convention (such as Comic Con, Dragon Con, Fan Expo, etc.)?

Yes No

If so, how frequently?

Once Once a year More than once a year

Have you ever worn a costume to a fan convention or event?

Yes No

Do you participate in fan forums, fan websites, online blogs or Facebook groups regarding the horror genre?

Yes No

Do you collect films (on VHS, DVD or in digital form)?

Yes No

Do you own or collect any film memorabilia?

Yes No

At what age approximately did you become a fan of the horror genre? _____ (Please specify)

Did your family encourage discourage stay neutral to
your interest in horror?

Did your interest in the horror genre start with

Literature Films TV Shows

Other: (Please specify) _____

Is your interest in horror part of your personal relationships? (i.e. are you friends/spouses also interested in horror)

Yes No

Is it important to you for your friends/spouses to also have an interest in the horror genre?

Yes No

How often do you attend the cinema?

Almost Never Once a year Once every 6 months

Once a month Once a week

Generally speaking, how do you watch horror films?

Alone With a friend With a partner With a group (mixed genders)

With a group (all or mostly female) With a group (all or mostly male)

Would you consider yourself to be knowledgeable about horror films?

Yes No

What would you consider to be your favourite horror film?

Please specify: _____

What would you consider the scariest horror film that you have seen?

Please specify: _____

Thematically, which types of horror films do you prefer? (Choose all that apply)

Ghost Stories Possession Films Occult Films Werewolf Films

Vampire Films Zombie Films Slasher Films Rape Revenge

Supernatural Horror Films Horror Parody Science Fiction Horror

Serial Killer Films Cannibal Horror Exploitation Horror Films

Monster Movies Classic Horror Psychological Thriller Horror

Other (please specify): _____

To what degree are you comfortable with graphic violence?

I enjoy it Very Somewhat Not at all

Do you feel that as a female, you have a different reaction to horror films when compared to a male viewer?

Yes No

Do you feel that being female influences your taste for horror?

Yes No

If Yes, can you expand on why?

Do you feel that females are under-represented in the horror genre?

Yes No

Does the presence of a strong female character change your horror viewing experience?

Yes No

If Yes, can you expand on how?

Which of the following do you consider to be “strong” attributes of a female character? (Check all that apply)

Athletic Intelligent Responsible Caring Kickass

Sexual Innocent Skilled Villainous

Androgynous Virginal Protective Sexual

Monstrous Educated

Other (please specify): _____

Thank you for your participation. Please return your completed survey to

amy_vosper@carleton.ca on or before March 13th, 2013.

Appendix 2: The Recruitment Poster

What's Your Favourite Scary Movie?

*Do you like being scared?
Are you a fan of horror movies?
Are you **FEMALE**?*

We want to hear from YOU!

Participate in our short survey about being a female horror fan and help us examine the **myth** that women do not enjoy horror films.

For more information, please contact:
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